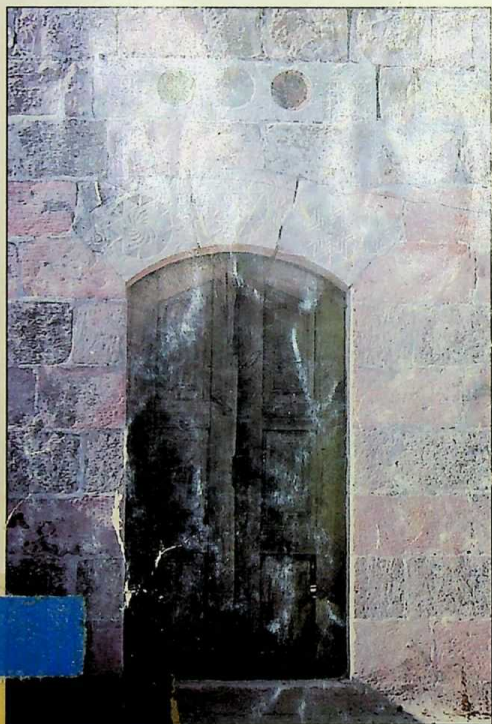


LETTERS UNDERWAY



Izzat Ghazzawi

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'Izzat Ghazzawi

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DEDICATION

To the scapegoat of the Earth
and to our fresh basil destiny -
wherever it may be

'Izzat Ghazzawi

RECEIVED

To the recipient of the book
and to our best wishes
whenever it may be

Yours sincerely



PREFACE

Dear 'Izzat,

Do these letters of yours really need someone to introduce them to the reader? What courage I must possess to spread my words like a fragile bridge for the reader to cross into this tense, pulsating realm... Did you really find this necessary, or did you want someone to fan the bellows?

Be that as it may, I will proudly convey these pulsations to the human being inside us, so that we may contemplate them and discover our fugitive selves; to carefully study their features so that the frozen lake in our depths will melt in apprehension... We shared in the heartbeats of Mahmoud Darwish when he called out from the frost of his cell two decades ago:

'One third of me crouches in prison but two thirds nest in the garden'

Before that there was Abu Firas with his *Rumiyat*, Mu'een Biseisu in the Egyptian Al-Wahat Prison, Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, and so many others... And here you are, from the ancient cell which this time is shared by thousands: with a lover's obstinacy you open the portals of your heart so that we clearly see the expanse of the dream that grew in your cold cell.

A writer performs the act of writing because he searches for a new horizon through which to survey the borders of the dream which become defined in the process of creation. But writing is not always so; he who writes in an unconfined world extended within the dimensions of time and space is not like him who is beset



by writing fever inside that 'tomb' - as you call it - observing the world from the keyhole. Here writing becomes an attempt to escape the limitations of that enforced horizon, a departure out of the moment of suffocation by summoning up yesterday's fragments so that the ordinary and familiar is transformed into a fertile gap and a multidimensional vision.

All this is surpassed in the writing of Ghazzawi's *Letters Underway*. It naturally surpasses the simple desire for balance as well as the state of enforced siege within the limitations of time and space. It also and undoubtedly does not stop at the delicacy and ambiguity of the coming moment, but rather and above all, it is a deliberate examination of the present moment's texture, a conscious penetration of its deeper significance, and a dialogue uninterrupted by a rigid 'I' and 'the Other' - so coldly embodied in the walls and bars of the prison.

When I first read Ghazzawi's short story collection *The Prisoner*, I realized that I was being confronted with new concepts and meanings for the word 'prison', and with a construction that allowed itself the freedom to shatter the elements of time and space and to rearrange them in harmony with their subject. As for his letters 'that are still underway' I acknowledge that many artistic preconceptions of the word 'prison' have been transformed. Prison no longer merely constitutes walls, rolls of barbed wire and advanced alarm systems, but has become a psychological and existentialist experience of, at one and the same time, extreme complication and simplicity.

When I asked the author if he found it necessary to keep the word 'yet' in the Arabic title that he chose for his letters, *Letters Not Yet Delivered* he unhesitatingly replied 'yes', although he gave me no explanation for his

reason in doing so. For a while I was confused by this 'yet', but when I re-read a few passages of the book I became aware of the deeper significance of the word. I realized that the delivery of these letters depends not just on their being read, but requires the act of (participatory) reading to transform the tranquil mind into a deliberate state of tension. They address the reader - whatever his position or viewpoint- through a number of questions and contemplations, forcing him to reject this reality and change its certainties. Hence the writer addresses the Turkish poet Nâthem Hikmet: 'You had no need to write to the dictator lurking in the rulers' veins. As for us, we have to write to our people, our wives, our children and our friends, and to another people who share our life. Our song is predestined to convey two languages at once, lest we should lose our home forever'.

The logic of writing within the spatial and temporal dimensions of prison can be interpreted in the context of documenting feelings, and of appealing to the sense of justice innate in every human being. But writing letters inevitably aims to achieve a different style and vision, because a letter, on the one hand, requires another presence attentive to its meaning, while on the other hand it addresses a multitude of people by virtue of its variety of approach. Although the author addresses an Israeli poet who, shortly before his death, discovered his waning sense of freedom because of his suppressing the freedom of others; he does not divorce this letter from one to a young Palestinian woman who wrote about her experiences in prison. In a third context (my words will not do him justice) the soul's fragments are rearranged in a direct address to the baby daughter he left behind and who visited him in prison, unaware of the significance of that visit.

It is not a mere coincidence that the prisoner writes to an Israeli poet, it is a means to appeal to the human conscience that awoke at that very moment and that did not die with the poet, but keeps pulsating in his words by exposing the death of conscience in living hearts. Through this parable, which conveys so many meanings, the imprisoned author is destined to assert that his "letters" are "still underway".

Whatever it may be, this writing is not a mechanical recording of a certain reality, but rather a creative style embodying the aesthetic of communication or revelation through the concept of the letter, combining the intimacy of dialogue with the open-mindedness of human conscience in general.

Dear 'Izzat, if Tagore, Lorca, Ya'ir Horowitz, Nafis Fikri and so many others died before your voice reached them through these letters, then your child and all the children with her will read these heartbeats with pride. There is no doubt that they will realize that the human sense of freedom will not be complete, nor its meanings exhausted, so long as there is someone crying out in search of it... Only when she and all of us realize this with you, your 'letters' will no longer be merely 'underway' but will have been delivered to our ears and to our hearts.

Dr. 'Abd Al-Karim Khashan

Once again the prophesy of truth visits me,
-this is an astonishing prelude-
Do you see those sitting in front of the house?
They are children like a dream's apparitions,
Children that seem murdered at the hand of their parents
Filling their hands with flesh, their flesh,
Carrying entrails, intestines
Clasp in handfuls of grief
Look well at what they carry,
The same taste their fathers sampled
-What is decreed will happen-
You will acknowledge with grief and distress
That I told the truth

Cassandra, in the tragedy *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus

The first entrance: Open the door

Now we complain of our passion for time,
complain of our ardor,
We traverse the darkness bitten by the wind
In spite of the fetters we saddle our dreams
on horses unreigned,
Their feet are wind, desire, the resurrection of space.
Now tell me, woman:
What dowry is yours when your father is a prophet
without a book?
Or a master who has lost his staff?
What dowry is yours, you barefooted one?
This splendor is no longer enchanting to men,
It is this camp, abysmal agony,
A loaf whose torrent of salt hurts the children.
Our alleys weeding a way for the walkers...
Return the greeting, woman:
You carry a fragrance of the spirit of rain
and moist earth
which courts the nose and the depth of memory,
So open the door to us when we miss our nights
and the moons of our houses
And the shrubs of our nudity below them,
Hurry and count all these houses
The world is your dowry, and children's dreams,
And lanterns fighting between the blazing light
and the dawning of day

The Second Entrance: We return and reunite

I dreamt that the camp and I walked to the river's source
We walked with the dawn to kiss the spirit of space
enclosed

Faraway we flew with our dreams, to say the prayer of
infatuation

The child in us said to us: Why do you pray
before you arrive?

For that is no olive or almond tree,
nor your neighborhood

And that which has grown up are prickles and boxthorn.

Said we: Leave us to tarry just a little longer,

Give us a promise from your dreams, oh ageless knight,

And scatter the path.

I dreamt that the camp and I walked and then parted,

But when thunder shook this broken covey

We returned and reunited

The Third Entrance: Between a nearby wound...

Desire is only broken by more desire.
So, if you wish, embrace your soul,
And let the distance between a nearby wound
And distant clouds
Be a long winter.
Rain, if you wish, under the *khawabi*,
And don't ask for time but for pale nights
coming on the wind.
Rain a ceiling, if you want, to come
Between your eyes and a wounded bird.
And sing songs to yourself
When your longing slays you vein by vein.
Cross the mount of desire;
Desire is only broken by more desire.



The Fourth Entrance: I review the book of days

If my friends come, Mother, before the afternoon
From behind the threshing floor
crushed by innocent steps,
And you see the napes of the young
perturbed by the sound of gunpowder and fire,
Take the pitcher
And wash their dreams,
Hang them up before the coming of daylight
On clouds that mount their lifespans
For I am of those dreams, I count them once before I
sleep at night
and dive back into them when I awake
I don't know why I dive, Mother
But when I prepare the flute that I love
I review the book of days
And this prison and this warden.
So I clasp my sadness in my hand
Sometimes, when I undo the soldiers' chains, Mother,
lanterns
And nights' glow above the wall of the bewildered city
lights up
- For this night, Mother, lasts so long -
The soldiers have returned to the graves,
The soldiers have returned to the stations,
The soldiers have returned to the threshing floor,
And the night, Mother, does not answer the question:
I blame this bewildered town,
And wrest from my veins the remnants of a night
engraved in the wall,
Its dream tempted my darkness
And its lightning tempted my thunder.
I blame her, while names are now absent...
Daylights' torments have gone,

The pile of delusions has covered the prison's
and the guards' tattoo,
The remnants of the whip no longer mark my body,
My eyes are no longer a blend of eyelids,
And what is under my shirt, Mother, has healed.

The Fifth Entrance: And the end of the night...

And at the end of the night we set ourselves free from
the heat of the questions
And submit the old to the new.



The Sixth Entrance: If only...

If only we didn't know that we used to meet long ago

If only we could forget time



The Seventh Entrance: We return

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We measure things by this word: Return
What will we return to?

... with the fall and the dream that it may not be able to reach the hidden beyond... but and recovery of being one of those who cannot poetry will there were eating a sandwich you begin with a soul that thing with you, or a sentence that challenges you with its truth, that art had poetry by and by only motivated by the necessity of the lines, its fabrication of music and the flowering-out, it is not a way out, the poem. The dream of perfecting it to God's perfection may be the way out. There has to be a final unwelcomed harbor from which you start - the point of departure towards the perfection. Once I imagined I went to the shore under the feet of Tugay, Lorca, Eluard or Marjaneh Harabeh - but at least it did not take me out of the field of my eyes.

I was saddened not to be able to witness that eternal moment of profound bewilderment, profound problems and profound perfecting. I was saddened because I didn't even find that point of departure towards perfection in the poem, although I dreamt of it like never before when I was in the cell.

I lived with this dream for a long time. It woke itself for a long time while the petty, forgotten details of life pass by me. Were the sniffs of a child or the coughs of a wife or even just sitting on the balcony as happens that they should cause such yearning? But the dream would come the very moment when yearning stretched itself. It would close the expanse of the cell and acknowledge its existence. At that moment the poem flows as a pervasive spiral thread between you and perfection.

Exit

Who shall testify that the child not yet come
Angles for a fishing hook?
Let him rise against the exit so as to arrive

It is wonderful to discover that you can come out of complete idleness into momentary bleeding- into giving birth, which you dared not resort to before, for birth comes with the fear and the anxiety that it may not be able to reach the hidden wound... fear and anxiety of being one of those who commit poetry as if they were eating a sandwich: you begin with a word that flirts with you, or a sentence that challenges you with its music, then are led astray by undulations only restrained by the monotony of the lines, the fabrication of music and the severing end. It is not a way out, the poem. The dream of perfecting it to God's perfection may be the way out. There has to be a limitless uncharted harbor from which you start - the point of departure towards this perfection. Once I imagined it about to take shape under the feet of Tagore, Lorca, Eluard or Mahmoud Darwish - but at least it did not take shape in front of my eyes.

I was saddened not to be able to witness that eternal moment of profound beauty, profound precision and profound perfection. I was saddened because I didn't even find that point of departure towards perfection in the poem, although I dreamt of it like never before while I was in the cell.

I lived with this dream for a long time. It hides itself for a long time while the petty, forgotten details of life occupy me. Were the smile of a child or the remark of a wife or even just sitting on the balcony so important that they should cause such yearning? But the dream would come the very moment when yearning stretched itself. It would close the expanse of the cell and submerge it in oblivion. At that moment the poem forms an oppressive spiral thread between you and perfection.

Is that the moment of 'elected death' one of our poets talks about when he tries to find the true sense of his attachment to the poem? It may be so, but he was born with that moment despite the pain and he did not decay in the maze of the Negev, so what will happen to me in this cell hidden from sight? I often wondered if I would be favored by seeing the feet of Tagore, Lorca or Darwish slowly setting sail from the harbor's maze. There weren't any buildings, vessels or space. There were only clashing waves - I sensed their proximity and feared their retreat - and smelt when they struggled between coming and going... - and the feet have not yet set sail. Much I wondered, much I waited, much I grieved, but I did not approach the moment I desired.



I suddenly returned to the harbor of departure where I hoped to see the feet of Tagore, Lorca, or Darwish set sail across eternity. I asked myself how I could accept that, despite its relationship to a certain form, the harbor vanishes like time and all its spatial features disappear, while I don't accept that departure itself is free from the slavery of form? I was delighted like a child who has found a piece of his mother's dress. I don't know why I imagined a child discovering a piece of his mother's dress while he is looking for her. I saw him light up with pleasure. The piece was not an entire dress, but it surely made him imagine the entire dress - perfection. That was the moment of enlightenment - the shape was no longer important: we can imagine it as we desire, and rejoice in our ability to create from chaos.



It was the first time I had come out of the cell into the space of a large court. How had I been able to stay between the walls of the cell for an entire month when I used to be like a butterfly, unable to spend a single night without waking up at least once to open the window and look out at the distance; to let my hand touch the night and sense its breath escaping from the pain of darkness?

I couldn't believe that I saw the sky. It delighted me despite the fence trying to slay it. Some workers were raising the walls of the yard which was a large rectangle, giving the sky a rectangular shape. My delight abated because the sky I knew so well was bound in this terrible form: its expanse, its horizons, its eternal dimensions that come nearer and move away like mercy, its sources of rain, the secret of lightning and thunder, its clouds and its darkness.

I found him waiting for me in a room that crouches at the far end of the courtyard. The sincere smile on his face encouraged me.

-I am Claude, from the Red Cross.'

-Hello. I wasn't expecting a visit like this.'

-How are you?'

-I don't know.'

-This is the third time I've tried to see you, but they wouldn't let me.'

-Where are we?'

-You don't know where you are? We're in Petah Tikva.'

Dear Claude, the rest of the conversation may have been very normal even though it lasted for two hours. I don't remember much of what we said during that time but I remember well that you said to me: 'I will stay with you for as long as possible - look at the sky and try to take a deep breath.' Did you actually know

how much I needed to do just that? Don't forget that I envied you for the kind of feelings you had while you were with me. You're in prison for a short visit doing humanitarian work which I greatly respect. But more important are your true feelings that within a few moments you will leave and forget the decaying cells. Claude, I trust you when you say that you suffer for each prisoner, and believe me, I thought deeply about those words of yours when I returned to the cell. I felt they were honest because I had read your eyes. But you can hardly know the mental release your kind words brought, and how they soothed my yearning and alienation.

I envisaged you, Claude, in light sportswear at the foot of the Alps. I may have been rather harsh to choose the highest summit for you to climb while I follow you with my glum looks. I don't know why I chose for myself the role of the prisoner who watches you but doesn't dare follow. Is it true that for a long period the Alps gave you an inner sense of security? If only here, in Palestine, we could feel that the sea gave us the same security. Instead of giving to us it has taken from us... Claude: the sea was in front of us and the river was behind us, but instead of feeling secure we felt trapped. As for you in Switzerland, the Alps gave to you without taking from you. In any case, Claude, the poem has invaded my feelings with sadness. I know that you are not Lorca, but as I haven't seen Lorca or even his picture, I like to imagine that the man may have resembled you... He was alone, desperate, he hesitated before he moved his feet from the mountain's edge... - just then a formidable convoy of eagles soundlessly appeared, their wings motionless yet sweeping down in full force in a certain swing aimed at his line of sight: I felt his heart would go with them, that he wished never



to return - it's the power, isn't it, Lorca? Did you really need all that strength to be able to walk the road and be the same man? The poem is born to the ever naked eye which tastes of the beloved. It has her color of wine, the smell of the henna in her hair and her delicate touch - yes, it is born on the departure of eagles in your range of vision, the bleeding of your heart and your honest desire to climb to the summit to watch how the sun comes up over the Alps. Afterwards you may lose the desire in a moment of lesser beauty. But it is of no concern because the poem will have been set free.

I am a child in this naive desire of mine - I mean the desire to stand still at the moment of birth. Why did you leave us Ya'ir Horowitz, you creative poet? The 26th of July 1988, when your soul serenely floated into the Brussels sky, must have been an ordinary Tel Aviv day.

The father has died, oh child
 All that lives will die
 And God hovering above the abyss is a dead soul

Why do you haunt me now, Ya'ir Horowitz, reminding me of the death of the father above the abyss? Dear Ya'ir, I was late in writing to you. When you took leave of life I mourned over you, and now here you are, visiting me in my cell for a single moment, reminding me of the death of the father above the abyss. I will certainly not resign myself to the death of God above the abyss because your beautiful poems live like orange blossom that are refreshed by the dew and pour love on to this holy land which has no holiness left except in name. Sad I am, because your heart failed you so soon. You should have lived to write of peace - you should have lived the time of the *intifada* to see for yourself that disgraceful humiliation of the people. They die - Arabs and Jews - while everyone waits for the miracle of peace.

Ya'ir, we have come to fear the talk of peace because we're no longer certain that this talking of ours is not interpreted as weakness, fear or hypocrisy. Today's logic progresses by going backwards, not by calculated steps forward. Do we have to arm the region and fill it with tears for the world to understand the sincerity of our intentions for peace? I naturally understand that people want peace if they do not have it,

and we have not had it for a long, long time, but is there an urgent need to wait much longer? Ya'ir, I'll tell you once again how much we needed your voice... maybe you would have said that they killed the loud voice of peace that rang out from Martin Luther King, or that they expelled the Dalai Lama from Tibet and murdered the love in his eyes for the crimson Himalayas reaching to the sun. What can a poet like you, whose heart fails him, do in the midst of the throngs of half-poets and opportunists? Maybe you would say that contemporary Jewish history witnessed an event that granted the poet his respect... One day in 1947 - during what you call the 'War of Independence' - a soldier killed an elderly Arab man in the city of Ramleh. He shot him when he crossed a merciless alley in view of another soldier who happened to be a poet. This poet's soul could not rest until he had written a poem describing his feelings about this murder. The poem escaped from the scene, and was replaced by the reflections of a poet imploring the barren sky for a single drop of water... a single drop to water the pale carnation at the door...'The father has died, oh child; all that lives will die; and God hovering above the abyss is a dead soul'. Aren't these your words, Ya'ir? But - as you say - David Ben Gurion read the poem and ordered that it be circulated among the soldiers.

I will not be angry if you tell me that, for you, Ben Gurion embodied the dream of a state in which were gathered the Diaspora after long centuries of dispersal. But don't you believe with me that we, too, look at Yasser Arafat from the same angle? He also wishes to embody the dream of an independent state for us, to gather the night of dispersion under the sky of Nablus, Ramallah and East Jerusalem.

Ben Gurion was magnificent in your eyes. He could not stop the acts of violence, but I fear no one

when I say that I also appreciate Ben Gurion's respect for a poem which cried shame at the violent scene, shivered at the vile tragedy and screamed out in the face of murder. Why then, don't we realize the dream of two states for two peoples? Ya'ir, when you died, you didn't leave behind a wife or children - as you said - but you left your tormented, beautiful poems. They have to read your poems: 'the Peacemaker in his heights will grant us peace; he is the soul hovering above the abyss'. Your voice comes to us faintly because heaven is so very far. I hope it will come closer until our ears are deafened and the dead rise from the dust of the grave to circulate your testimony at the soldiers.

Last night I woke up from a dream. My sense of time is like perpetual bleeding, silence and vertigo. I tried to recollect the dream's details but found that I had lost the thread - I discovered that I hadn't dreamt a new dream but a story that had suddenly sprung forth after 22 years. June '67. I was fifteen. People were often speaking of war. I saw them sitting in groups on the stone benches and on the doorstep of the Great Mosque in our village. They were impassioned. I didn't appreciate what exactly war meant, but on the evening of the 9th of June I felt that things were serious, painful, sad. My mother came in so quickly that she was robbed of her essential familiar dignity. My father was sitting on his floor cushions in the middle of the house, tapping his foot with the palm of his hand, his eyes overcast. I didn't feel he was very concerned about the war. He didn't go out into the neighborhood to hear the news, but was satisfied with the news we passed on to him. I don't know why his voice sounded strange when he muttered the words he used to repeat so often; it was the first time I found it strange:

'Oh mother, in this world he worked
 All hope deluded him
 Death comes unexpectedly
 And the grave is his toolbox.'

'People are fleeing to the east and you're reciting poetry?' shouted my mother in agitation. He quickly stopped and opened his eyes. In his seventies, light beard, white hair, peaceful, he loves the house, loves my mother, a poor refugee that left in '48 with the others,

leaving his elderly mother to die under the staircase. They say that she - my grandmother- refused to leave. He dropped to his knees begging her to get on the donkey. She refused. Then came the roar of the cannons. She killed herself under the debris and vanished. He cried for her for the rest of his life - he was all she had, she all he had.

'Do you have to leave then?' my father said. My mother said: 'There's no one left in the village'. He looked anxiously at little Siham, my three-year old niece whose mother had left her with us on her last visit. Her mother is now beyond the river in the Jordan valley, and this is war: I understood the terror in his eyes. 'Give me my clothes', he said in a subdued voice. My mother opened the wardrobe. She handed him his bundle of clothes. He got up in his white *sirwal* and went to the courtyard. He took the kerosene bottle and lit his lighter - we all froze, even my mother. We left him by himself, knowing that he wouldn't leave, and set out for the east. We didn't stay away for long. We came back on the evening of the fourth day. We found him as we had left him, drinking tea.

Father - I now understand how terrifying the signs of departure were for you. The interrogator said to me (it is now the 3rd of March 1989) that deportation is a harsh, but reasonable punishment. He said this with indifference. Maybe he wanted to measure the extent of my agitation or fear at the idea. Father: do you remember the day when I decided to cross the river to take the little girl to her mother? What a pity that I could not convey all my feelings about the journey to you upon my return; that may have been a shortcoming of mine at the time, or a shortcoming in the communication between us. And when we became friends (me 18 and

you on your way to 80) my story had died without leaving a trace. But now my story has come back from death, unfolding like the wind, while you don't. When the truck set off with us, and everyone had sat down on their bundle, the screaming and the noise did not last long because everyone had checked their belongings... women weaken with travel and children wilt, vomiting, then drooping into their mothers' laps. Siham slept peacefully on my knees. I was close to the back door, looking at the street racing with the lorry. The plains of Toubas were wailing - or so I imagined. Over their entire expanse not a single plough sunk into them to break up the engraved furrows - although there were some green patches. And so the lorry stopped at the river. The men jumped out one by one. They took their children and helped their women down. I jumped on to my toes with the little one and took my small bundle.

The water of the Jordan has dried up and all life around it has perished except for the reed stalks. The sun is scorching hot and the travelers cross the river holding their breath afraid of their secret's disgrace. To me it didn't seem that there was anything wrong - all they had done was to leave, each for his own reasons. I found a solitary car which I took, not knowing where it was heading. In Deir 'Alaa I got out with the child sleeping in my arms. She opened her eyes on her mother's face exclaiming her joy at the meeting, holding back her tears, surprised - it had seemed so impossible. I had delivered my charge but stepped into the trap. I had no comfort during the three months I spent on the other bank of the river. Everything was strange to me. Where was the calm in my mind that started to sting like a thorn and to overflow with longing? But eventually I returned, walking the entire distance on foot to the outskirts of Nablus. It was the first time I learnt what return means.



And that day I also knew why you burnt your clothes
when facing the threat of departure.

When I returned at the call I regretted having
spoken about the journey that, although it was true, I
realized - how greatly we needed to rewrite history,
needed a group for the accumulated years of subjugation
and dispersal, and for the sad heads shaking from
controversy and rolls of blood.

I am a child at the gates of Syria. Peace be upon
you. Rashed thought that you're also a child at the gates
of Beirut and Amman, begging for the dream of return
to dissolve the miasma of darkness and to break up the
land. But instead of returning, your tender body exploded
into splinters because you killed by your son.

Sleep only tastes of pain. When you wake up
you find you haven't moved, and indeed you don't know
why - you don't need to, it's all yours.

In the cell even dreams sometimes die to come back to life once more. I do not want to spend a long time in the stormy memories of the days beyond the river, except that I reluctantly stood in a long row of children and women in front of a large tent - a plastic container in my hand. My hand trembled with embarrassment, anger and fear. Finally my turn came. The man gave me a roll of bread and put a scoop of beans in the container.

You are so cruel, River... I crossed you neither in victory nor in defeat, but felt an overwhelming desire to cry when I left you behind me because you had not given me the feeling that you flowed with any pride. It seemed to me that you were dead, dry, killing yourself with every drop that flows towards the Dead Sea. How can I be guided to the exit to the dream of the poem with this untamable labyrinth ahead of me?

'You want an independent state, so where should we go?' the interrogator said to me. 'We don't want our state at your expense', I said. 'That's a falsification of the facts and you know it.' 'Why didn't you establish your state in '48?' he said. 'Didn't you have the West Bank and Gaza at your disposal?' 'Our loss was always terrible' I said. 'We are speaking of now, of the future.'

When I returned to the cell I regretted having spoken about the terrible loss, although it was true. I realized how greatly we needed to rewrite history, needed a gauge for the accumulated years of subjugation and dispersal, and for the sad hands shaking food containers and rolls of bread.

'I am a child at the gates of Syria'. Peace be upon you, Rashid Hussein. But you're also a child at the gates of Beirut and Amman, begging for the dream of return to absolve the mirage of darkness and to break up the tent. But instead of returning, your tender body explodes into splinters because you folded up your tent.

Sleep only tastes of sleep. When you wake up you find you haven't rested, and when you sleep you don't know why - you don't need to, it's an escape.

Escape as you wish:
The door is a door
The window's locked by a thousand fences
And the floor of the cell is a swimming pool
awaiting more nudity
But I prefer to watch.
Rise from my pain, beloved torturess,
Rise from my pain,
I call you like a drop of soul,
You, first of all longing,
You, last of all longing ,
This distance is no longer a distance.
Rise, you sweet one
Don't ask me why now, don't ask -
Stay as you are, don't pin up your hair,
Don't moisten your face,
Don't ask wings of butterflies,
Stay as you are,
I want you and the dream as if I slept on your eyelids.
Peace be upon you.

-'What's that voice behind the door?'

-'Don't you recognize me?'

-'I haven't seen this picture before but you look exhausted, gentle, and deep down in your eyes you seem proud.

-'Is that how you recognized me? I am the one who flashed before your eyes few moments ago. I am a child at the gates of Syria.'

-'Rashid! Poetry has its own essence when your heart is in it.'

Dear Rashid, you didn't die in order to get out. I confirmed this a year ago when a visit to Nazareth led me to Mount Tabor. At the time I was fascinated by the secret of the transfiguration- the Messiah's transfiguration - on the mountain which courts Marj Bin 'Amer in rueful silence. A young man was sitting by himself against the wall of the church absent in the book he was holding.

-'What are you reading, friend?'

-'Rashid Hussein's poetry.

-'What do you think of it?'

-'I don't think *of* it, but *through* it - can't you see that it has made me oblivious to all this beauty surrounding me?'

You were right, young man. He etched the Galilee into our memory and illuminated it with children's longing for joy. How could he ever die?

Dear Rashid, you will say that Mahmoud Darwish etched Mount Carmel in our memory and illuminated it with drops of oil that preserve the soul. He is the poem itself, he is the wound, the knife and the

bandage, the bleeding voice, a drop of the end of the night. You will say that Mahmoud Darwish looked at the Palestinians' tragedy from an unprecedented artistic angle. It made him fold the distance as he stood on a commanding hill, his hand pointing to the windows of the universe, each one showing Carmel's summit: it is as it has always been, unchanging, colored by the raging sea. And just as he pointed at the summit he pointed at the tent, at the suitcase, the departing harbors, at the platforms of darkness. He should have screamed in Al-Mutannabi's face: I, Mahmoud Darwish, am more entitled to say: 'Time's concerns are manifold, while yours are always singular'. But Darwish did not stand alone at the window pointing at the waves of the sea murdering the spirit of Beirut, eagerly driving the battleship into unbounded nudity. Samih al-Qasem stood with him, and Abdel Latif Aqal, Mu'een Biseisu, Muhammad al-Qaissi, and Fadwa Touqan, and Salma al-Khadra. They are the ones with whom you can truly stand at the poem's very beginning and follow it through with nothing else in your heart. Peerless, they stood on the threshold of their time, but at the point of departure they heeded the course to the end of the road. They pointed at the intense blackness of Golgotha without losing their composure. They respected the poem and did not repeat themselves or gorge on the poem like a sandwich, nor did they draw delusive maps. Their gestures were filled with visions: They could see *The End of the Night* and *The Lesser Flower*; they envisaged *The Time of Ascent* as well as *The Seasons of Life and Death*. But even so, they never resorted to nihilism or absurdity; nor did they force themselves into proffering forged solutions for the tragedy of their existence as



fighters for freedom and dignity - a nobler equation for the meaning of existence.

Dear Rashid, times may be different now, but you authentic poets gave Palestine a voice to be proud of, in spite of the narrow patch of sky, the long days of darkness, the frequency of relocation, and in spite of the gloom sprouting up around us. It is you who stood at the gate of Syria, waiting. You gave Samih al-Qasem that great bleeding when you advised the mother of the fighter 'to seek refuge somewhere in the house' to hide her tears of separation. You gave our poets the yearning ember to shorten the distance between Ansar 3 and Neve Tirtsia, but they themselves saw how shackled souls ignite the Negev.

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- 'How do you pass the time?', the interrogator asked me.
 - 'Easily. I dream the time away and write my poems', I said.
 - He said: 'How do you write without paper or pen?'
 - 'I have stored these moments in memory', I said.

I wonder what I would have done had I not created the poem to talk to. Were it not for these gentle visits that come rushing in, unconnected with time or space, I would certainly have suffocated. How I wish I were able to record all the perceptions that have now begun to intertwine in the heart of a clear, absolute, unlimited void. That was possible for a great poet such as Nâthem Hikmet. Although he challenged the decay of his cell alone, he had pen and paper, recorded his observations, wrote his poems and his letters, and drew his paintings with a real brush: Nâthem Hikmet, I can understand you better now, even though when I first read you I felt I was living with you. Your words seem remote now, but I can indicate with absolute precision the small island that formed your poetic world, remote from the scream but lying in the straits of tears binding this dark world. You were tortured by the screaming of your people, but you also lived your personal tragedy which we understand so well. It was dreadful, your struggle for the creation of a poem that never came: it didn't come in its true sense, although large parts of it came through in your letters to your wife Munawar. Prose and poetry you wrote, but there you illuminated the ways out of the poem, entering them into sweeping realms with so much precision, so much conviction, and a great deal of magic. Nâthem, you poet: I may live the same tragedy in this

cell, so quiet except for the screaming of the soul which incessantly wonders how any force can tread underfoot a people's desire for justice. You strongly desired to be freed from the rule of the domestic dictator that haunted your people for a long period of time. As for me, I strongly desire to see our children go out into life without fear. You say, Nathem:

The news of the people, the world and the country
The news of the birds, the trees, the wolf and the stone
I bring to the people in the briefcase of my heart
At midnight or at dawn
By way of poetry I have become
A postman for humanity

How would these words of yours sound in the Turkish you wrote them in? Translation is enervating, especially when it is the poetry that you carry in the briefcase of your heart, when it concerns pulsations that lose much of their beauty because the shades of meaning and the infinite range of the music is dissimilar, and when the proximity of one word to another can only be understood by a poet. I say to you:

Ask the child that has not yet come
If he'll accept leaving without a promise.
Cast at him the obstacles to oblivion
And leave him unbound,
Let him swim by himself in the bloodstained clouds
Heedless of his mother's bosom.
Don't disturb him with your voice,
Don't murder him with your silence,
Don't crucify him with your dream.
He doesn't want jasmine or wreaths,

He is your voice, your silence and your dream.
He who has not yet come
Will refuse to leave without a promise.

I can see that our children aren't living their childhood. They skip that innocent, sweet stage and walk unchildlike into this voracious world. Someone like you can understand what I mean when I say that this makes my heart bleed. Dear Nathem, when one of our poets came from the maze of the Negev he wrote about a Jewish child who had deeply upset him. It was the child of one of the soldiers who accompanied his father during a visit to Katsi'ut military detention camp, which we call Ansar 3. He was without doubt a normal child in everything: in his innocence, in his childish beauty, his unkempt hair and his broken sense of security. But he upset the poet because he reminded him of his small daughter Hazzar, so far away, there being no room for her at the visitor's window. He saw himself embracing the child and pressing a kiss on his forehead. The poem erupted like a volcano, half fury, half hot tears. We can understand childhood's genuine desire to take revenge, to upset us deeply, to remind us of the moment of birth, of weakness and strength, of the continuity of life. But what do we do when the guns break out firing and their sound drowns out all others? That's tragic, is it not?

When you were in your prison you wrote to your people, to your wife Munawar, and to some of your friends. You had no need to write to the dictator lurking in the rulers' veins. As for us, we have to write to our people, our wives, our children and our friends, and to another people who share our life. Our song is predestined to convey two languages at once, lest we should lose our home forever. Did you know that we

agreed to divide the house between us and the Jewish people? We must make sure that one of us doesn't want to lay claim to the whole house to throw the other out. Dear Nathem, with heart and mind we will understand the admonition you gave to your comrades:

My comrades: if I die before the day of salvation
(And it does seem I may)

Bury me in a graveyard in one of the villages of Anatolia
And, if possible

One seedling above my head will do, no need for an
epitaph

Or a tombstone on my grave.

But you lived and died far away, so that the distance between Siberia and Anatolia remained suspended between the admonition and its realization. The matter has been settled regarding you. But as for us, there must be an epitaph and a stone on the grave.

Despite the overwhelming desire to escape, you have to confront the ambush of pain in the cell. Did you think that being a writer would somehow protect you from the attack? Maybe this arrogance was imposed by the truth of the clear division between human struggle and the smell of a gun. 'What do you think!', the interrogator said to me, 'Do you want us to be more democratic than the English? They use these interrogation methods on members of the IRA. 'Why don't you make it easy for yourself; I said, and use your revolver? If you like I could give you an excuse to kill.' 'And why should I kill you like that, and so quickly?' he said. 'You have to die slowly.

When you die such a slow death, in an unknown place, alone except for faith, unable to see anything except your soul preparing to depart, and a balcony so high as if it were on the moon, you stare at this twofold tragedy: death and the homeland. The homeland always was the point of departure towards creativity. It tickled the soul with visions it could only sense, but that would defy seeing, feeling and hearing because they are eternal in their advent: does the homeland deserve that we die for its sake? This inquiry is persistent rather than fleeting, challenging to the level of impudence, and there is nothing you can do but answer. After all, you may leave the homeland, but the homeland won't leave you. It is that blaze of light bursting out from the eyes of your wife, it is the touch of children, it is a quiet afternoon on the balcony, a hurried escape in the street, the shadow of the city going to sleep or emerging from it. What would be left for you if you lost all that? Why, then, does the homeland turn into tragedy? Is it because we've lost it?

In fact we have not lost it in that deepest and most universal sense of homeland, because we do, in fact, sense it. The problem is that we always fear for its sake, fear that one day we will wake up to find it has slipped away. The right to rule the homeland, then, is the mystery of being at rest in it, and the loss of being at rest is a natural equivalent to death. So how do we walk these two ways at the same time being the same man? Only then did I realize how homeland and death are blended. Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer, sensed this kind of death and lived exile as if he were dead. Europe's luxury did not give him any relief, nor did the glistening of bare clamor, so that he returned from death to the homeland. Eventually he found someone who spoke of the reformation - perestroika - he himself had prophesied, and through his prophesy he found himself reborn without losing the homeland. In his town, before his exile, they called him a rebel, and in his exile they called him a communist revolutionary. He says that he is a poet and that is enough. But, more importantly, he carried the tranquil Danube and the Ukrainian plains in the briefcase of his heart - as Nather Hikmet says; he left the homeland, but the homeland did not leave him. Isn't that the tragedy of Mahmoud Darwish and Mu'een Biseisu? Mahmoud left the Carmel to find it in Cyprus, London, Paris and Beirut. Even when he wanted to rise up with the poem to reach that which is between it and the soaring skies of Paul Eluard, Lorca and Tagore, he only found the Carmel as a stopping place between the toils of travel.

Mahmoud Darwish experienced the pursuing homeland. He is haunted by a woman he does not know but to whom he has said: 'Your eyes are a thorn to the heart - they torment me but I worship them'. When he



lived in Beirut the same woman haunted him, nor did her image grow lighter in London. He believed it was she who had not abandoned him even though he himself had left, so that he sang her the most beautiful songs. Now he has traveled the world with her, given her a more universal experience, colored her with an indelible childlike memory so that the poem has become synonymous with the homeland. At the moment of creation it is only an attempt to conciliate it, to flatter it, to kiss its ears of corn, and to recollect it as tiny fragments in the folds of the soul that longs to embrace it. Muhammad al-Qaisy was like Mahmoud; he envisaged the homeland like a wave slipping from him whenever he tried to embrace it:

You withdrawing blue,

Slow down.

There where the earth falls down here,

Where the water cuts itself a creek,

And the villages sleep house by house.

There where I banquet on my soul.

She is my dish every day ... I don't find her there.

You withdrawing blue,

I don't find a bed for my longing.

The wave slips away from me at last

The wave slips away...

But memory trembles when villages sleep house by house, and slaughters the soul with deprivation and desire. All that while the poem rises up, circling around itself until it grants the poet the exquisite reunion with the homeland. Why then aren't death and the homeland two tragedies with double borders, the only true

meaning for death and the homeland, to die in the homeland, to die for the homeland?

All of them realize that the homeland won't leave them... that it follows them, suddenly emerging in a passing vision or a moment of silence, bursting out like a song... the poem becomes its synonym, and the homeland and the poem become two creations courting one another, cruelly and violently pursuing the other to death... That is the real meaning of the mixture of death, love and homeland. This idea was a source of anxiety for a writer who was confused by the ambiguity of being an émigré within the homeland - Akram Haniyeh - in his story '*The Death of Citizen Muna L.*'

Akram found himself intruding into an intertwined world, because the girl has to choose between living in a dead homeland or committing suicide, between ruling in the homeland and loving it despite its bleeding wound. This also was the dilemma for one of our poets as his eyes broke through the barbed wire walls of Ansar 3, there where singing, although courageous, is transformed into a sad attempt to overcome the tragedy of exile in the homeland, alienation in the homeland, a death perforce. Akram Haniyeh was taken out of the homeland involuntarily; the homeland had not parted with him. To him it was the last harbor...

He outlined this with his trembling fingers, predicted this end in *The Memories of Muhammad Arabi*. As for another poet, the wind of the Negev was left to him, blowing up grains of sand, as if it were abducting them, causing apprehension in his spirit leaning on the poem's source. And his visions were left to him. The echo reverberated and told him of the coming days, of days of happiness that would calm his

soul; for he saw how the desert swallows all that rain,
how days and dreams dwindle; but he sang to those
seeds that dwindle and dwindle to one day about with
joy.

'I fabricate white gestures, in isolation' says Apollinaire. I wondered if that were really possible. Fabricating white gestures in isolation means that you have complete freedom to travel... to where? That won't be important for travel is not always guided by will or by a temporal or spatial direction. It's travel, and suffices. Mu'een Biseisu talks about travel as if it were the end of him, and he did in fact, die while traveling. The hotel that witnessed his final hours was not a home but rather a harbor to him - a platform to cross to the nearest train or boat. But Mu'een, in his isolation, was able to fabricate white gestures exactly like those Mahmoud Darwish fabricated when he measured the reality of the distance between Cyprus and Palestine, and exactly like those other poets fabricated counting grains of sand in the Negev. They engendered the chains, the guard and the whip inside the poem itself, just as they created the stillness of the night, soul's liberation and the splendor of daybreak. Are those the gestures we fabricate in isolation? And in the *bosta* you travel also. You manage to steal a movement from your shackled hands to remove a part of the blue blindfold wrapped around your eyes to see part of the road. April 1989. A limited movement and a sensation of confinement fight over you. The movement throws you on to the iron body work of the shuddering bus. You fear sudden blows that will come on you unaware. The sensation is the smell coming from the naked road - as if you find it strange, as if you can't believe no one wants to imprison it.

The fragrance that comes to you is not the pure, unadulterated smell of orange or lemon blossom, but the beloved smell of moist earth you have always loved,

mixed with the smell of wildflowers. The Green Line, that ever enticing delineation, buries you in rich feelings. Through it we are transfigured like the Messiah on the mountain, we savor the downfall. It offers a thousand ways to escape from the self and to find refuge from the pain of memory, but in the end we decide that our transfiguration is final and that our tent is beyond it. We have nowhere else to go. You are fully prepared to accept the truth, so you must free yourself from this exaggerated romanticism - although you can't escape from love. Independence in the homeland is both love and marriage; being a refugee in the homeland means that you lose *the* love and *the* marriage. We made our choice in the 19th session of the Palestinian National Council; they will also have to choose.

But what have you got to show for in this *bosta* that hurriedly covers the distance? It has transported you from one loneliness to another. In the former you used to close your eyes and search for the outset of the poem; there you wanted to see a savage, ancient beginning severed of all ties, to flee from yourself to that beginning so as to sense the power of your soul and to vanquish this degradation, this defeat. For you the equation was clear. When you find someone who kills your freedom, try to discover the extent of his power-physical limits are confined by limits not subject to the laws of physics- there, beyond physics, the oppressor's power ends and it is you who is triumphant. He is confined to a violent closing and opening of the door, to searching the window high up by the ceiling, to inspecting the slogans written on the walls with egg yolks, margarine and the silver foil of cigarette boxes, and to examining the many names painstakingly

engraved by their owners- perhaps to challenge the coldness of the wall and its denial of their hot blood.

One of them wrote his name in red, perhaps his blood pouring from him. I still remember some of the names: Wasef al-Low, al-Sa'adiyah Quarter, Mahmoud Safadi, Al-Thuri, Hani Jaber, Jerusalem. It is strange how many names these cramped walls can carry. They all came and spent some time here. One of them made a calendar from butter, so I knew that he spent 21 days in the same place. On the first day he wrote on the wall 'my beloved mother'. On the last day he drew a heart with an arrow through it, and at the point of the arrow he wrote 'my beloved' without 'mother'.

In the *bosta* your other loneliness is occupied with the smell of the road, with the fear of unexpected blows and with vague expectations: where are they taking you? What can you do? You don't even know where you are traveling... perhaps another detention center... you might stop traveling if, at some point, they leave you in the middle of nowhere. It would be a shame if your search for a beginning should stop. Try; you might be able to silence the clamor and the anxiety. 'April is the cruelest month', says Eliot in *The Waste Land*. Resurrecting life from death, stirring dull roots with lustful springtime fantasies, and all doors are flung open. But this April is strange... it is coming but I can't see it.

The second loneliness, then, is a state of motion. Your heartbeats rush as you stand inside the perfect circle. You see yourself, a dot on its upper part, afraid to escape from its higher arc, or to fall should you change places to its lower arc. What is the point of all your pain and self-searching, for some answer to all your questions, when you lose the will to move or think, when you feel that another force transports you like an envelope without an address? What can you do?

The *bosta* stopped. I was the only envelope in it. This must be Yafa Street. A female soldier got on and sat down between the two policemen that occupied the bench seat. She looked at me indifferently. I don't know why a sudden anger took hold of her and made her spit. 'Is this part of your job?' I said to the policeman. He pretended that he didn't know Arabic. I lapsed into silence. I don't know how much time went by until the *bosta* stopped: another place of detention.



April 1989 surprised me by all the standards that I know. It was the return of humidity, life contracting at anxiety's assault, so that you have to try and control the initial music felt by the poet before he is released from his familiar physical limitations. I don't know why a gray picture by the French artist De Steen came up in my imagination, so blurred with teeming ideas and beginnings. De Steen made his studio into a legend. He saw the Parisian streets brimming with riches and tried to transform them into pools in which to immerse himself to escape the pain of poverty. At a certain moment all the images died. They froze around a single, inescapable image: the apparition of his wife dying from hunger and disease. His creativity stagnated because justice had been separated from freedom; and when wealth knocked on his door, he could only commit suicide.

'In my opinion' says Edmund Burke, 'whenever justice is separated from freedom, both are in danger'. What is happening now is not a separation of justice and freedom but a total collapse of both. They are not in danger, but rather witness their tragic presence at the time of the *intifada* here in Palestine. To be more exact, and so that no one will accuse us of seeing ourselves at the center of the universe... yet we do see ourselves, in the light of the enormity of our tragedy, as living not in the simple center, but in the very center of the murdered part of the universe.

An Israeli wrote an open letter in the Jerusalem Post to an Arab woman who was the nanny of his children and who had lost one of her sons through the army's bullets. He says in his letter that he feels appalled at what happened.

In beautiful poetic language he could see his children being embraced by Um Ahmad when she came to their house each day. Maybe he wanted to express his feelings of fear at what had happened. He was shaken by the emotion and compassion that Aristotle speaks of, and thus, through the letter, was able to convey the general notion that has become the main concern of both the Arab and the Jewish people: the Jewish people will not accept that we be transformed into a South Africa, and for us Palestinians it will be difficult to accept that freedom and justice should collapse forever - even though this part of the world has already been ravaged to its very being. The letter, then, is an unconscious expression of feelings that may well be common. He does not want to be free himself to move as he pleases, while others are constricted, and so he has to transform these feelings into a great battle to strengthen freedom and justice and to render them inseparable.



The 'tombs' of the Moscobiye are the same as ever... many have stayed here since you got out, dear Nahida, but they didn't leave any trace on them except for the names and stray thoughts written in a clear hand in the prisoner's notebook.

I did not know that the Moscobiye would be the starting point for a short story or a poem because the place is too dense to imagine, too large to take lightly and grasp hold of one's recalcitrant artistry to hold it still at a beginning or an end. We are all *waiting for the dream*, but it doesn't come the way we want it to, even the dream is distorted by the density of the place, because it collapses under the feet of children of twelve and thirteen who walk in confused abandon behind the soldiers leading them by their handcuffs. Do these children really think that chains are bracelets adorning their wrists?

Dear Nahida, I loathed the thought of our children thinking that chains were bracelets, as some of them expressed in graffiti, because chains are a disgrace; they are fit for animals and pulverize the soul - how could we transform them into an image of beauty? Next we will change rubber bullets into necklaces and tear gas canisters into flower vases.

The way to the Moscobiye canteen is the same as ever; many feet have trodden it since your swollen feet came and went. The smell doesn't change either, I haven't yet found anything so repugnant to the stomach. More than once I thought of absorbing myself in this state of motion. You leave your tomb for the canteen just for the change; maybe you eat something, or you just sit at the stone table observing the prisoners gorging

their food so as to avoid having the guards screaming at them to finish in five minutes time. But what's the point of absorbing yourself in this state of motion?

You must write about the food, about the frozen chicken feathers that you may come across, the pale, strangely distasteful slice of *mortadella*, or the hot soup with a mixture of onions and macaroni floating on its surface. It fills me with loathing and kills my ability to cross the dividing line between silence and screaming. It should be the task of the many committees sporting the belt of human rights that come and go in the detention center like the welcoming flowers carefully sown at the exit, and like the smile of the director when he receives them and sees them off. What do they write in their reports? And what are we in the briefcase of their minds?

Dear Nahida, Do you see why I refrain from occupying myself with rejecting, or voiding my stomach at the putrescent smell? There are always three courses to each meal. A wedge of tomato, three olives and four slices of bread come to a three course meal, don't they? So what's all the screaming about?

Today a young Israeli woman came to the detention center. She told me that she was secretary to the High Court of Justice. None of the other detainees spoke Hebrew, so I had to talk to her in English about the conditions of the detainees. The yard was brimming over with the May sun. May, as you know, has a very special relation with pigeons. They suddenly appear, fly across the fence and find themselves a drainpipe to nestle in. They don't even flinch at building their nest on the cross of the iron bars covering the sky of the yard. Pigeons bring an involuntary flow of affection, like sudden joy after anxiety.

'Uhm, how are things with you?' She purposely said this to make me aware of her importance before speaking of our situation. I said: 'I want to ask....'.

She smiled faintly. I did not know how to interpret this; it occurred to me that it may be an attempt to tell me that she had no time for questions, or that it was not up to me to pose questions. I only had to answer! Before long I took matters in hand and decided to continue whether she liked it or not.

'...whether you've come to change things or just to ask questions? I feel you haven't got much time. I was reading a book and would like to go on reading.' 'No', she hastened to say, 'I came here to listen to you in accordance with the wish of the High Court. Of course I don't promise to change things from night to day, but I'll try.' 'Do you know how many detainees are held in this room meant for 12 people?' I said. 'No', she said. 'There are 32 detainees in here; three or four sleep on the threshold of the bathroom.' I said.

I felt that it was useless, but I talked about the ten minute visits, about the double fences, how daily rations are stolen before they get to us, about the incessant screaming. And of course I didn't forget the story of the food.

When I returned to the 'tomb' I felt that all the poems in the world had deserted me. I can't sum up the expanses of citrus groves of Qalqiliyah, like you used to do, Nahida, nor recollect the image of young girls undoing their braids at the massacre of Sharaf at-Taiby. I don't know how to sustain this very delicate balance between silence and screaming. How can we recollect the dream when we are being driven from one cell to another, from a wounded throned to one that bleeds profusely, and from a bus carrying numbers to another carrying envelopes?

I recalled how Shakespeare tried to describe the summit of human suffering in the character of King Lear. When the world turned on him a face ugly beyond human endurance, he found nothing to call for help, nothing to reign in the tempest. 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th'Gods; they kill us for their sport'. So what is to happen in this contemporary world which no longer has 'gods' in the ancient, mythological sense of the word? Our era has accepted the fall of the name, but not the fall of the role. Gods have changed into villains, generals and executioners who have torn out the world's heart and God's grace and wrapped them in steel and nightmares. There was Hitler, and Franco, Pinochet, Ian Smith, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt, and when these gods fell it was the name that fell, not the role. This time it is no longer a person or a god who executes the crime, but a state system; not, unfortunately, the collective conscience of the nation but the 'democratic' state system. How can we sustain the balance between silence and screaming when these tears know no sleep and nightmares do not fear to wake up? How can we,

when those bound with sacks cannot breathe, and the stony Moscobiyeh benches ride their sweat, their blood, their bent bodies and their glistening eyes? How can we, when most of them are boys that do not tease neither flies, nor human beings, nor flowers, nor the pages of notebooks?

Does the world purposely turn its face to us with such unbearable ugliness, as if it bears no relation to us? I went to great lengths to try and find some other explanation for this wounded mass of Palestinians. It seemed to me that the world perceived them as the source of all evil, the clothes' hook of the world stretched out for all its sins. It is they who ignited the First and Second World Wars; it is they who built the camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka and exterminated millions of Jews; and it is they also who preached misogyny and chauvinism. No one else is left to bear sins, thus everyone in the world can throw stones at them.

What next, dear Nahida? True, we are waiting for the dream, but we are also waiting for the revelation of the truth. I may have found part of the truth in Abu Kabir. Of course I am not talking about the Forensic Institute but about the detention center; are they alike? I'm not sure if they are, but I am talking about the transit section in Ramleh prison, the place my terrified memory has stored in drops which even the most exquisite places in the world will never erase. I never imagined (and my imagination may be weak, which I readily confess) that one could discover the ability to affirm human sensibility in the midst of the pessimistic and sinister image. There is a fatalistic motion and smell to the transit section, with its wounds and wails. Here, God's image dies in the hearts of those who believe and those who don't, while other images and mere characters fade away. When you come in, it seems you need to tear out your heart and fling it under a gushing pipe to wash it with the first mad rush of water.



The desire to tear out my heart was overwhelming when I met him there for the first time, a fourteen year old boy who immediately made me forget all thoughts about myself and even about this dusk-filled heart of mine that shivers with yearning for water. When he came into the cell he looked back as if to register the closing of the door. I wondered if I would be able to give him a reassuring smile, but I didn't try. How could I give him something I did not have at the time?

-I've just come from the court.'

It seems to me that these words of his were no more than an attempt to create an excuse for cramming five persons in a cell fitted with only two beds, separated from the door only by a space enough for the dinner plates. Slightly nervously, he rubbed his hand and sat down on the edge of the metal bed. When he saw me clearing a space at my side I said to him: 'Did they sentence you?' Now I tried to encourage him with a drawn, plastic smile. 'Yes', he said, 'but I don't know for how long they sentenced me. Really, I don't know what they said in the court.' 'Don't worry', I said, my hand gently patting his shoulder, 'it will all be down in writing. We'll find out how long they sentenced you for.' 'Where have you come from?' I asked him. 'From down there, I was in Gaza prison,' he replied, catching his breath. 'Were you in the cells?' I asked him. 'No', he said, 'I spent days in the 'slaughterhouse'.

The word 'slaughterhouse' terrified me more than anything else. Where is this dream we are waiting for? I never for a moment doubted that there was a dream and that it had a course through the folds of future, but I was concerned that the nightmare may become the dream. Darwin's theories did not gratify my overwhelming desire to be certain: of time, of form, of

result. What would this transit section look like if transmutation took place? He came walking at me while I was in the transit section - but I was so absorbed in thought that the boy Hafez az-Zaher no longer existed, although he was sitting next to me.

The *bosta* shrieks in its haste. A massive gateway opens up and swallows it with a right turn, along a road bound by two unbroken walls. It covers the distance not in time, but in a convulsive noise making you feel that your life is measured in noise, convulsion, dizziness and chains cutting into your hands and feet. Another gate splits open before a fleeing swarm of startled rats throwing themselves on to the scattered piles of rubbish. You sense the closing of the gate, severing you from the world's umbilical cord, from the sun in the street, from the trembling orange groves that used to kindle in you the harvest seasons, from closed off lanes, from the edges of distant tents and from a step you have begun and are loath to set down... Before the pain of the chains makes you fall down a silent image of your wife flickers over your eyes... you are baffled how you can find her a place contrary to the brutality of this place so as to soothe your heart a little, to distance you from the brink of screaming and from the infinite expanse of a bottomless pit contending for your soul. Once, the place you found her was the balcony of our house, our doorstep, or a walk to our village, the stretched out road on which we ran with the children. Once it was not a place, but a state of being in which I could not form a place.

Eventually the chains make you fall. You furtively cross the gate of the transit section. You pay no attention to the hand of the guard rummaging at your belongings, your pockets, your waist. You go down the

stairs being number so and so, without height, width, or profession, down to the world of the transit section burdened with cells to your right and your left, distinguished by those narrow doors, rust-eaten but clearly no less strong, their locks shining with a faint pallor. You have to choose your own cell... yes, you *choose* your place of residence. You decide to go into the nearest opening that will embrace or swallow you... Those that chose before you greet you, ask you the usual questions, eagerly listen to news of the friends they left in another opening. Presently your anger subsides. You become independent the moment you go inside, accumulating the complete disruption from any earth or sky except for their remains in the briefcase of your heart or from the last way station you left without knowing where you were traveling. Unlike you, others may not want to search their heart's briefcase, or the last way station from which they left. They stand still as if stung by an insect, they head for the door that violently embraces the steel bar in the upper part of the roof, the corners of the cell denying them any distance between where they are sitting and the inhuman door. They stand there, their eyes stealing from the window; their ears relaxing at the blend of talk coming from the other openings. They find that it is the usual chat about sentences, overcrowding, interrogation, lawyers, about the merchants of the *intifada* and the clothes and flour thieves. They groan with irritation and return to their place on the iron bed, and to the walls of the cell burdened with names, dates, saws and sentences. Some of the sayings please them, or appease them with relevance to their own situation. They purse their lips because they all insist on prefixing their names with the

word 'brother', 'comrade', or 'your brother in Islam' - in the end they are taken up in the inmates' banter.

What brought you here, Hafez az-Zaher, a child despite your fourteen years? Throughout my detention I dreaded meeting someone of your age, even though I knew that they come here, go into the 'glass eyes' that always observe, take their numbers, that the *bosta* transports them as if they were unaddressed envelopes too, that their tender bodies also tremble at the blows of the truncheons and the kicks of the boots. Although they sing, you see the remains of suppressed moans around their eyes and in the corners of their mouths. Hafez az-Zaher, you came as if to remind me of the strangulation of my hopes and the death of the poem stretched between Ansar 3 and Neve Tirtsia, a whole distance electrified by a single moan, paved with tears that vie with the waves of Gaza. A distance that, in each camp, violates a woman with disheveled hair and feet bare but for their cracks, cloaked in mourning and devoid of life and passion. What, then, did you leave of the poem's source but for these bloodstained departures at the moment of endless absence? And what did you spare if the entire distance from Ansar to Neve Tirtsia is a single moan?

But do not worry, for there will be another distance: that which is stretched between a corner of your eyes and the anticipation of the dream. Fill it as you wish, until it overflows and drowns the poem in challenge.

You sleep peacefully as if you were cradled by a lullaby from beyond the noise; perhaps you unconsciously delineated the fall of grace at the entrance to the transit section. I saw you twitching as you listened to the stark singing coming from the neighboring or opposite cell:

'My brother in the cell,
I heard your voice call out to me...'

You may not have thought, Hafez az-Zaher, that you can raise your voice in song, not out of fear of whom is behind the cells, but rather because singing is a flowing, tickling state of being inevitably wrapped in grace... whatever grace it may be, from God or from humankind, or from the hiding places of the self. Does it seem to you that grace has disappeared altogether and will remain absent until you see your mother, the features of whose face you forgot that moment she was ablaze with madness at watching you being pounded by the truncheon? 'If only I could see my mother...' you tell me before you go to sleep.

'You will see her, Hafez, why are you so scared?' I'm telling you. With your eyes from a stolen world you're gazing at me, as if you don't believe me. 'I just want to see her', you say. I have failed to try to transport you to new limits, to days yet to come. I talk to you of songs of happiness and sand, but you constantly ask me whether you will see your mother. If only you knew what longing - the original kindler of insanity you ignite in my hart, you would have seen her in metaphor. Is the prison night of any use, or all the vaunted courage of any avail against the challenge of the entreating sight of someone you love?

Dear Hafez az-Zaher, That's not your real name, in accordance with your wishes... I doubt this letter of mine will ever reach you, like other letters that may not arrive are still underway. You, at least, will not be able to read it yourself because you never went to school, as you told me. Maybe this eight-month term - the term you were sentenced to as we heard the next morning - will not be enough to penetrate the barriers and ambiguities of language. Maybe the days will transport you, as they transported others, to a world without letters, that does not believe in them and does not want them. I don't know if that will make me sad - I'll turn to a premature close of the anthem and be silent.

You sleep anxiously after your initial peacefulness. You haven't uttered a single word that I can turn into matter. I begged you to erase the terror from your face and return to the first moment of your sleep, as if you dwelt in your mother's lap. My begging was of no avail and remained suspended about my eyes, closed behind another plea, its limits the departure from the transit section. 'Have you ever been in prison before?' you ask the young man sitting on the floor next to you. 'Yes', he tells you. You look into his face as if you want him to go on. 'Five years', he says to you. You stare into his face in astonishment - maybe you measure the five years by your age, by your mother's work in the fields of Gaza, or by the three years your sister Miryam spent paralyzed on the doorstep of the camp. 'How did you spend them?' you say. 'It was over before I knew it', he says, 'I didn't have a family at the time'. Were you satisfied with the answer, or did you withdraw to measure time or the expanse of the cell?

You sleep and turn around your decreed axis. When you leave the transit section you will undertake many heroic actions, and maybe some false ones too; so you will become confused? Will the night of this transit section be enough? It feels so long, confining your breath to turn the circle of holiness into shaded squares or rectangles, and others saturated with sunlight but never quenched. Or such will be prison, a perfect circle of holiness, beyond which sleep those searching for freedom so as to fall into another search, for other things in addition to freedom. Which one of them does not find the other things now that the circle has become so cramped? It will be up to you to discover those who search for themselves in the midst of the wounded crowd; the desire for discovery may suffocate them. And what lies in wait for you? Many moments of discovery, maybe some great moments too. You will sleep by a clock that does not sleep. You must be like the watchmaker (as Newton suggested) and set your watch for eight months so that it will tick on without stopping.

'Gone is the luster of the balconies of old that radiated with magic and eternal pearls'. We are not in Bucharest, Muhammad al-Faituri, we're in Jerusalem, but the balconies of years are also lusterless. Jerusalem's balconies never did radiate with magic or eternal pearls, but with the torches of invasion that scorched our faces. Is it selfish if I believe that the balconies of old also lose their luster through this gasping bus carrying all its false numbers, that sets off somewhere else as soon as it has stopped? Farewell, Hafez az-Zaher. At last we are leaving the transit section to where we don't know. Your hand is infinitely small, and an odd pallor dwells in your face. Your image suddenly vanished when the door was closed on you, but you kept haunting me with the obstinacy of childhood traveling with me in silence and anxiety. Traveling with me... travel and the not yet created poem are two concerns that share a clock which is never set to a certain time. In court I prepare myself to set it. June 4th, 1989. Who are you standing up for, who is judging you and what is your accusation? Where are you? You have the answers and they have the keys; as Muhammad al-Maghout says: 'they will give you the clock, but take away time and you'll disappear. Why anticipate if you don't control time? Take it easy. They won't give the watch to you now, so where are they taking you?' I finally discovered that this was no longer of any significance even as the *bosta* stopped at the entrance to Ramleh prison. How I wished the threshold of indifference would stretch up to Avicenna's eighth heaven.... 'The eighth: a desolate plain. It has twelve towers. Here nothing happens in the



way that we, in the other heavens, think it should. Stars do move, although they seem immovable from afar. Even in a constellation they remain solitary.'

This was not a sudden frenzy, nor mere Bohemian insouciance, but rather a rendezvous with the anticipation of a poem, coming with mad exuberance to challenge the watch, its setting and the distance between the prison and the sun of the streets. This distance is so long! Where is the mind's definition of this distance in respect of the senses' definition, and which one is truer?

'I have divided the fruits of my life
into two twinlike pieces
just as silence and sound are alike to the deaf -
take wisdom or choose insanity'

How I wish choosing was as precise a matter as Aragon saw it; is there a real choice between wisdom and insanity? Here wisdom and insanity are to no avail, even if I did choose either one. When I left her- my daughter Marwa- she was six months old. I vanished from her in a way that will not leave me until I die. She in particular is one of my secrets; she freed me from the dilemma of preferring a boy over a girl from the moment she was born. On the last morning I woke up from a dream in a bout of sudden anxiety... I quietly left my bed... something made me take the cover from her face, red with the trickling warmth of childhood hidden in the baskets of the unknown. Her sleepy smile made me wish she could creep inside me. The last thing I expected was that she would open her eyes, but she did, and her smile broadened. It was as if she had found a long lost beloved looking at my face drawing nearer, absorbed in wonder above hers... I felt as if quenched after thirst. Maybe I recollect the desire for her smile to flow into me.

I don't know how I left her, but her tiny hand came out from the cover's labyrinth and patted my face.

Dear daughter, The four months that went by between that last morning and your first visit to Ramleh prison were charged with the sparkles of that last smile. When the space in the cell would shrink and lead to a train of thoughts - any thoughts - I used to go over the features of your face, afraid they would change before I would see them again. Does childhood change so quickly? You stand at the visitors mesh window with an indifference that puzzles my heart. I go over your features with the speed of lightning, and am astonished at how much you have changed. Meanwhile the thirty minutes time does not get longer, as if it were ordained in one of the heavenly books, just as a man knows the hour of his birth and of his death. The hour of birth is expected; all that comes after is fear of the end. You stand there as if I had never stroked your hair or drank from the basin of your face, as if I did not long to play with your fingers, as if I never washed you with warm water or told you stories before you knew any, as if my absence has made you so angry that you have forgotten me. I beg you for forgiveness, Marwa, make up your mind. But my plea was to no avail. The ice of your indifference did not melt. You don't seem angry, but rather fearful and reluctant to acknowledge the person standing behind the fence begging for the repetition of former moments that he thinks can never be lost. But you escape from the repetition, from my call and my kiss, and even from the shouting of the police guard ordering the visit to end.

For the first time I realize what it means for a man to know when he is born, when he dies and the distance in between. Does he really shut off his world so carefully and do colors, smells and sounds leave him? Why does the mystery of death baffle us then, if we enter the experience this way, with a humiliating shove from Occupation? When I did not come back to the cell, and no one asked me if I had (although they did ask me about the visit, and if it was nice) I did not try to color my world, and I could not see the feet of Lorca, Tagore or Mahmoud Darwish suspended between heaven and earth. Instead I stood at the gates of a camp that I used to go into as a child. It was a normal world to me, as if the corrugated iron rooms were of our own making, the running sewers with their festering smell of our own choosing, the hunger a deliberate fast, illness a prevailing custom unrelated to physiology, and as if God (our Heart washed in early winter) had given up trying and closed the doors of his grace. Maybe this is a real beginning. This way of seeing things helped me to return, even though Marwa had not acknowledged me.

The details of those minutes
 were the tokens of a repeated death,
 and the names of those streets were
 commandments of an eradicated prophet
 But I came... from the edge of yesteryear,
 without a ticket

Indeed, Mahmoud Darwish... and I also came without a ticket, and with the same details you speak of. The prison cell looks out on to the transit section so that you can see every *bosta* arriving, emptying out its numbers at the gate and taking in others going out to other places. But now you see these things from above, locked up, haunted by the coming and going in glistening chains, and by sensations of pain felt in a silence which does not allow you to speak about them, perhaps because you do not know the details. You lie down on the iron bed, trying to form a clear image jumbled by the window grill. Is there anything more comforting than the sight of a patch of earth, I mean normal earth not sown with iron thorns or cement? What a tree it is! It is a real tree, I can see it clearly, with earth and plants around it.

You feel the bottleneck preparing to expand. You must get warmer, heat yourself up to aid the bottle, so that you will burst out in spite of the din of the prisoners around you who also know pain, longing and wide, unlimited open spaces. Suddenly the image of the transit section swells up and is devoured by the howling, overloaded *bosta* which sketches in your mind the shudderingly traveled tunnel. Shortly an entirely gay world appears, and the *bosta* stops suddenly and



vomits the exhausted numbers out from its belly. Their exhaustion is conveyed to you with the speed of a passing smell: don't say anything... one wish dies in me while many others stay alive... I am lost among the voices asking about so-and-so; where did he go? When did he get out of the detention center? How many are still left in the cells; is so-and so among them?

Night comes...those around me sleep after lengthy tossing and turning... Tired of talking, they suddenly yield to moments of silence as if they had returned to their naked selves. Worry invades their thoughts. They silently converse, each one with himself. Snoring rings out from one of them; someone turns his head to the wall in protest; his protest ending when he falls asleep.

All of you sleep, leaving me the repose of the fenced-off window... The lights (a bright yellow tinged with a rapidly receding red) are burning around the large watchtower and on the shadow of an armed policeman moving up and down in monotony. The small area in front of the prison gate is peaceful under the search lights, as if no one ever set foot on it, as if it is like other places... to me it looked just like an execution square returned to innocence directly after a hanging and the end of the 'crucifixion of the shade', as Aragon puts it. 'Those not disturbed by the voice of the dead... sleep grinning from ear to ear, such is the murderer's joy'. What can you prisoners tell us about your chaos?

Fawaz Abu Kaf, Sur Baher, Jerusalem, 19 years old. 'They took me after 8 o'clock at night. Loud knocking on the door and the windows... My mother came into my bedroom, terrified, saying: 'Fawaz, Fawaz, did you hear that?' I had woken up at the first knocks and curled up in my bed, blocking up my ears... what had made me refuse Adli's offer to stay at his place that night? I couldn't escape... the sounds got louder... they are breaking down the door... my mother screamed and rushed out, beating her chest with both hands... I don't know how I got dressed. All I know was that moments later I found myself amidst a large group of soldiers and cars. They blindfolded and handcuffed me.'

'On the seventh day I learnt that I was in the Moscobiyyeh. I found that out from another detainee tied to the stone bench next to me.... I won't tell you that they beat me, but at one stage one of them strangled me with the wet sack until I felt my eyes



would pop out... When I came to, all I could do was confess. I confessed.' Fawaz smiled faintly as if he expected questions from the other detainees. 'Was the interrogation hard?' one of them casually remarked, as if he were stating a fact. The comment gave Fawaz a sudden fervor. His eyes lit up in rage but before his intense agitation was translated into words, another young man jumped off his bed and down on the floor of the room: 'Couldn't you have held out a few more days?' The rage died down and was replaced by embarrassment. 'Of course I couldn't have held out longer... if you'd been in my place...' But the other youth angrily cut him short: 'we've all been in your place. You'll tell us about the banana position, the freezing cold water, the closed-off fridge, the hunger and what have you. I confessed, like you. I am no hero, but I managed to hold out to the end. So why didn't you hold out? Who forced you to confess?' 'I told you I'm not a hero', Fawaz screamed, 'I confess to you and our brothers here that I could have held out ... the sad thing is that I had no previous experience, not even an idea... I thought I wouldn't get out. I admit my mistake... I don't blame you but I want you to know the truth.'

*From chapter twenty to twenty-six I will try to convey the experiences of seven prisoners gathered in one of the cells of Ramleh prison with whom I lived for some time.

All the days spent after confession are more difficult than interrogation... the fear, the worry, the waiting for the lawyer, the postponement of the trial, the longing for visits... In prison we turn into obsolete machines as the years gnaw at us while we gnaw at the years. So what do we do? We make mistakes and lay them on the shoulders of weakness, the fear of dying in a cell or the pretense that they already had all the information and there was no point in being obstinate... Sometimes we pretend that we faced up to the interrogation, but that other members of the group confessed or maybe even imaginary people.

That's not a row... it is as if the physical compression of the hours of the day robs us of our ability to distinguish between screaming and analysis. Is it possible to know the difference in a small room swallowed up by iron beds, a bathroom and eight men? In any case, that's not a row - even though it has deprived me of the link with my inner world and my contemplation of the bare feet slipping by like dreams outside the prison behind the great wall and the 'yard of innocence'. It is not a row, but an impassioned analysis of the multiple cloud-swaddled phenomena of the *intifada*... As for the rain... as for the rain and the tales I hear with my heart in the quiet of the night... will you repeat them again?



I went into a room that looked like ours except that it was larger. You can imagine what a state I was in after 27 days in a cell... I was so disgustingly dirty that it seemed as if my clothes were a part of the cell walls. When the guard shoved me in I stood still at the door as if I was entering a strange world of which I wanted to see even just a few meters... Three of the young men in the room jumped down their iron beds and welcome me. After I shook hands with them all I sat down, apologizing at every opportunity for my clothes, the shape I was in, and my repugnant smell. 'Don't worry, brother', one of them said to me, 'have some tea and smoke a cigarette and then get into the bath. We have clean clothes donated by your fellow fighters.' Within half an hour I actually found myself under the rush of warm water and was removing the putridity of 27 days of Moscobiye cell and benches, rubbing all the parts of my swollen body.

'Welcome, fellow fighter', their leader said, having finished the afternoon prayer ablutions. 'Would you like to join our daily session?' He quietly smiled at me. 'I'll listen', I said, 'though I'm tired and need to sleep and relax.' 'You can sleep after the session', he said in a subdued voice.

We were a large group, and we listened... I was transported to a world of fire with a thousand doors to freedom: we stood in silence in honor of the martyrs, we sung for the children who had lost their fathers - forever or until further notice - we talked about the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of the State, the decisions of the 19th session of the

Palestinian National Council, about the peace plan of the Israeli prime minister and his meeting with American officials in Washington. Suddenly the circle tightened: 'What are you accused of, fellow fighter?' The questioning surprised me. 'I wasn't accused', I said in an attempt to cut short the conversation on the topic. 'We're all brothers in here, you must tell us so we can do everything necessary. We have to write a report to the leadership... that report is read by one person only, brother Yasser Arafat. We can look after your family during your time in prison.'

After I wrote the report they took me back to the previous cell and confronted me with it. Me... who had not let the cell walls hear my voice for 27 days.

When I came into the Jalameh prison cells I found myself alone between the walls... I couldn't define exactly how many days I had spent between the interrogation chambers and the square of phantoms. It felt so long that it seemed that God had forsaken me and the cell felt like a better place to have moved to. I passed more than an hour reading what my predecessors had written on the walls. Some of them had written in margarine, some with a small stone that they had chiseled out of the crude walls. I spent a long time looking at something written in pencil on the door: 'You who are in sorrow, sorrow will be dispelled'. What all-engulfing comfort this expression made me feel, gently spreading to my hidden pain... After that I laid down on the lump of sponge mattress opposite the toilet. I could feel a severe thirst ironing out my insides... after some hesitation I gently knocked on the cell door but heard no answer. My insides were parched and my blazing hallucinations only compounded my thirst. I knocked again, louder now... I knocked the 'door of the water tank' as in Ghassan Kanafani's novel, but no one answered. By the tenth knock I realized that the walls of this tank did not conduct sound. I stood in front of the toilet. All I could think of was a drink of water...

A big arrow had been drawn with great precision in the direction of the metal handle of the flusher, then upwards. 'What would make a prisoner draw an arrow like that?' I said to myself. 'I'll try and follow the direction of the arrow even if it's just for distraction.' I pressed upwards along the arrow, then up

further. The water gushed out into the toilet bowl but a strong line of water spurted upwards. I knelt down on my knees in unbelief, the line of water spouting into my mouth, sliding into my insides and extinguishing the inflammation of my craving madness. Afterwards I laid back, my eyes trained on the ceiling. Water no longer made me crave and thus my desires drifted in other directions, growing smaller, then larger, leaving me, then coming back. My head was teeming with anxious questions about the lie detector they would take me to: What does it look like? How does it work? Does it really detect lies? Will I be hostage to a machine that exposes my truthfulness and my lies? How could I escape the inquiry? The walls, the locked door and a small opening in the asbestos behind which I could not see anything were all there was. There was a calendar in margarine starting at the first of January and ending with the expression '32 January'. I wondered whether that expression was intentional or whether the writer had lost his concentration. You can't imagine how much attention was taken up with this observation. It made me forget the question of the machine for quite a while, yet I was also reviewing my own calendar. How long had I spent in the interrogation chamber and the yard? There was no way to find out, but I had started to be aware of the number of days passing from the darkness and light accumulating around the asbestos slate that shut off the opening of the window. I'd actually gone to the cell to think, after I had not been able to do so in the interrogation chambers and the yard, but in the cell I could only think of my inner world. All I could do was feel, which might have been the reason for the unusual



intensification of my sensation of things, of the sound of the door as it opened for a meal, or the electric whizzing of an unseen gate opening with a faint click and immediately closing with the same sound. Or sometimes of the sounds of footsteps passing below the window or maybe further away, or the monotonous stirrings of the detainee living in the neighboring cell who kicks the wall after the third meal, as if to tell me he's still alive. I respond likewise.

Then, on the seventh day, the door of the cell opened. Instead of breakfast a thickset guard was standing there with handcuffs at the ready. He put them on my wrists and led me to the space for the *bosta*.

The machine at last! But the bus traveled long distances. I was on my own, chained to the metal floor wishing I would wake up to a patch of earth to ease the dizziness after I had vomited out all the contents of my stomach. 'Calm down man', I said to myself. 'Are you going to let this hole tire you to death?' The conversation with myself did not do me much good. The guards are like a caper tree that lashes on to you and won't leave you until you bleed and groan. Where are those open roads then, as you are being led from one door to another? Don't ask anyone for anything... and always remember that you are your own mystery. Who knows... you may die or you may come back. But you remain your own mystery.

The bus stopped at long last... I could feel it going into a gate and before long it made a small circle, then stopped. I knew I would get out into open space once again, perhaps I could fill my chest with fresh air. 'Have you heard of Sarafand prison?' one of them said to me. I did not respond except for a meaningless

motion of my head, seizing the opportunity of being on solid ground to freshen up my spinning head.

At the door of a new cell I stood still... but this looks just like the other room... it has prisoners, cigarettes, tea, a bathroom... I knew that the five of them - all those in the cell - had finished with the story of the machine a while ago, and that they had of course become quite experienced in it. They deeply regretted that they themselves had not tried to get prior information on the machines, but were ready to pass on their experience to others. I could not tell them anything - that's forbidden as long as the interrogation is incomplete - but they eagerly taught me how to outwit the machine's intelligence. Through their examples, the five of them could have taught me how to outwit the machine's intelligence - but they were more intelligent than me and the machine.



I don't know if any of you know the village of Taqu'... anyway, it's close to Bethlehem, deep down in the mountainous area where they say that the Messiah - peace be upon him - walked barefoot and where the thorns drank his pouring blood. I lived the expanse of the village lands with the roaming sheep, dividing my time between school and shepherding, and when I left school only shepherding remain. When the grazing lands became smaller and smaller I headed for work in the nearby settlements... To me the settlements were a source of comparison with our village: its narrow streets, its *tabouns*, its sheep and the villagers' poverty.... These settlements are exactly like small cities; they remind me of fast and new wealth. I went into all of them without exception and worked in street cleaning, construction and plumbing. Where do they come from with such force? They begin with a building plan... the architects arrive at the location in their nippy cars, put red marks around a piece of land, and within weeks the building is standing there... looking out over Taqu' from afar as if it were sneering at its houses. But then I was busy with shekels: I bought a TV and a video and filled my room with luxury furniture. I nearly got married, had it not been for the tremor that ruptured Taqu' one morning.

It was a strange day. That night several shots had rung out in the sky above the village - after which silence had reigned once more. In the morning, when I picked up my bundle to head for the settlement, my father suddenly came out of the sheep pen - someone had to feed the sheep - and grabbed me by the shoulder. 'Where are you going?' he shouted. 'To the settlement',

I said. 'Don't you know what happened?' he whispered angrily. 'They had come after midnight and arrested seven young men from the village'. I felt as if the distance between Taqu' and the settlement had been barricaded. How could I go now?

At sunset the mother of 'Abdelhamid came to see me - he was one of the seven detained. He was all she had in the world. I saw traces of black bruises around her old eyes, but she wasn't crying. Maybe she had cried all night to arrive dry as the branches of the pomegranate tree planted in front of our house. She shut the door of the room behind her and did not sit down as I thought she would. 'Abdelhamid says to you to go to the cave of Houriyeh and to put out the fire', she said with a rattle in her throat. 'You know that he left the cow down in there, and she's my livelihood.' She did not wait a moment longer.

March '89 and the cold of winter is still here. How much this old carob tree captivates me! I worked the saw on it so many times to cut off the dry branches - my mother likes to have a lot of wood. Why did she choose this carob tree in particular? I hugged its thick trunk and felt its steamy warmth in the heavy breathing of my chest. I stood there for a long time so as to calm down. I don't know why, at that moment, I felt as if I was saying farewell. Over the years, during the olive season, we felt that the carob tree was our outdoor home. We ate and made tea under it, slept there when we were tired, gathered up the day's harvest and bundled it in sacks... our white donkey's rope was always wrapped around its trunk to carry the day's exhaustion. And underneath it I, too, talked for the first time with Shifa, who had come to help my sisters with



the olive picking... Perhaps it was also under this tree that I felt there was a place for dreams in the life of the people of Taqu'... Shifa is an orphan, my cousin and my fiancée. 'How old is this carob tree?' she once asked me. 'I don't know,' I said, 'nor does my father, nor my grandfather. It's old and strong.' 'It makes me cheerful', she said, 'it's always green, that's why!' 'Yes', I said, 'I love it as much as I love you.'

The entrance to the Houriyeh cave was surrounded by a darkness I had never seen before, broken only by the pale light of the moon which disappeared from one moment to another with the passing of the clouds. I went in, hesitantly at first. I did not feel at ease until I lit my lighter, hoping it would disperse the darkness. I walked to the sound of a monotonous clock. It must have sounded much fainter than I thought. I took it - the clock - to the mouth of the cave and tried to stop it, not knowing how much time I had left when, soundlessly and painlessly, I felt myself explode. I did not find out what had happened until I came to in Maqassed Hospital, my hands wrapped in white cloth and my right leg tied to a support.

They say that my mother went to look for my fingers but that she only found a piece of my right index finger, which she has buried under the carob tree until I get out.

Do you know Solil Boneih? It's a large construction company I've worked for since 1972. I used to go wherever they would take me. During that time my life changed a lot; I got married and had five of my kids. At the time of the *intifada* it became difficult for me to go to work as usual and many weeks went by during which I could not reach my job. In the company they said that my absence would result in dismissal, and in the village they said that it was wrong to go to work on strike days. What to do?

The *children's mother* said: 'Open the shop again.' When I was young I had worked in commerce, but the rising and ebbing life of the villagers, and their habit of buying things on credit made commerce a job doomed to failure. I won't say that I, my wife or my children used to go to bed hungry, but I just couldn't get ahead and was thinking of the future as I watched the children growing bigger, and saw their growing needs.

I wasn't encouraged by my wife's idea; where would I get the capital to reopen the shop? She accepted my point of view, and we agreed that I would keep working until we found a solution to the problem. Thus I accepted work as a guard in addition to my construction job. The places I guarded were large warehouses belonging to the company. They set a small room aside for me to sleep in at the end of the night, or for when I made myself a cup of coffee. It was the first time away from home and the children. I wondered what the villagers would say now that I had taken to sleeping at my workplace, and how my kids would put



up with their friends talking about it. I was not the only one to resort to this way of ensuring job continuity, but at the start of every morning, and the end of every evening during those few weeks - I think it was five - I felt as if I was committing a crime. The last evening I sat on the floor of the small room, going crazy. The piece of bread that had made me leave home stuck in my throat. I had willingly changed myself into a fugitive. A mouthful of bread is only an unclear station for a train that does not know where it is traveling. I am there, at station, and all the travelers standing there with me hide their faces, and I have hidden mine. I missed the clamor and the voices of the children, I missed my old house and its courtyard open to the wind and the moon. At dawn I got on to the bus and went back, just like that, without having got my wages.

On the third day, before sunset, they took me away. I learnt that the storerooms had been completely gutted the very night I left work and took unauthorized leave. Was it possible? I didn't burn the storerooms, I don't even remember going into them that night.

She was gorgeous, that girl, my 19 year old middle sister. When our mother died (she went to the Hijaz to visit the prophet and didn't come back), Aminah (that's my sister's name) became like a part of my mother's soul. Whenever I looked at her I could see myself walking down the Hijaz road with her peaceful spirit, silken and tender, traversing Marj Bin 'Amer on her way to an East enchanted with the cloak of estrangement. 'Abdelrahman', Aminah often said, 'do you think mother died there because the prophet loved her?' ' I don't know', I would tell her, ' but she hasn't come .'

There were many men in our village, Daburiyeh- which is close to Nazareth - who were enticed by worldly desires. Marj Bin 'Amer and Mount Tabor had become mere place-names to them that were no longer alive in their hearts. With time they turned into eyes and ears that saw and heard, and could only attend weddings if they were girded with steel and fire.

One day, after school and at the beginning of Spring, when Mount Tabor looked terribly tempting to us boys, I climbed the mountain as usual to collect mushrooms and to walk on the wall of the old church a little. I once stood at that last threshold to the mountain while my mother was looking for herbs - thyme and fennel - and mushrooms. In that place you feel like you're in a glider submitting to the temptation of the wind's sudden release, and so I lifted up my arms, imitating the movement of a flying dove. My mother (God rest her soul) looked up and screamed: 'What are you doing? Can't you see the slope?' Her face went pale with fear for me... Her features used to come back to



me very quickly, becoming clearer sometimes, withdrawing at others. I wondered what had made me remember her so vividly. I thought the place and the dream of the night before might have been behind it.

In the dream I saw my father come out of our house with at his side a strange woman whose face I could not see. My mother silently and hesitantly walked behind him, and soon enough turned back, leaving him with the strange woman. I was standing at the window, sad because she'd submitted and turned back, but delighted to see her. I presumed that she'd gone into the courtyard, so I waited for her and when she did not turn up I went to look for her. I finally found her on the doorstep to our old house (which we had turned into a storeroom a while). She was squatting on the ground next to a blood-red mattress. Aminah was lying on the mattress as if she'd been born asleep. I could only see her face daubed with pale purple clouds.

'She is beautiful and peaceful when she sleeps,' my mother said. 'Why is she sleeping here?' I said. 'She came after me', my mother said, 'she knows I love this house. This is where I got married and was pregnant with you children from the very beginning.' I wanted to stretch my hand out to Aminah's face to wake her up, but my mother whispered: 'No, let her sleep here.' After that I woke up, puzzled at the face of my mother and at Aminah's peacefulness.

Only the sound of gunfire made me stop thinking about the details of the dream all the time. A dreadful scream made me stop in my tracks and dash back down. When I got to the house Aminah was flung across the living room. She'd stopped moving. I saw her, far away, with blood around her neck and chest, as

if she wasn't my second mother. The house was full of the noise and the shouting of the children, and the smell of gunpowder.

When the *intifada* came four years had passed since Aminah's death. I would think of her as the bride with a dowry of exile and martyrdom in the book *The Time of Ascent*. Meanwhile I saw Abu'l-Khader wandering through the village, Aminah's blood weighing on his shoulders as heavy as Mount Tabor and as tormenting as the plain. I wanted him to burn alive, but the *molotov* cocktail only scorched his face and head.



At sunset Jabaliyah Refugee Camp heaps up on itself like a boiling *tannour* in June. The streets of the camp swell up under your feet like suddenly inflamed festering abscesses. The people in the street are almost devoid of their normal facial features. I would see them pass by at the speed of lightning, like in films, their features suddenly vanishing, all searching in the road sand for something to throw. I was standing at the door of our house, my hand jerking like the other hands, looking for anything throwable at my feet. My mother grabbed me, her eyes frantic with fear. My small brothers were going in and out of the tin door. Sounds, sounds, sounds, coming from everywhere. I did not ask what had happened, because this scene had become familiar since the beginning of the *intifada*. Even though I was a youth of nineteen, I had never been involved in it from the time it started - strange, isn't it?

I wanted to be involved like the others, but my mother said: 'How could you, with your wings clipped? What will I do with your father lying on the floor of the room, who can't move unless I move him? And what about your brothers, who do they have except you?' So I didn't get involved. I would walk to work, satisfied with watching the *intifada* from afar. But that day I did not ask what had happened. They came running out of all the alleys and gathered before our house carrying Fawaz on their shoulders. Fawaz, the boy from next door, my soul brother, staggering in his own blood. We had spent our schooldays together, shared bread, games of chess and the dreams of refugees: 'with the spirit and the blood'. Fawaz is a martyr, the sound is a martyr, the wings are a martyr, the camp is a martyr, and I got

involved. Yediot Ahrenot reported: 'Mehabil mi 'Azza herag rafih bi Rehov Hayerkon bi Tel Aviv': terrorist from Gaza kills doctor in Yarkon Street in Tel Aviv. I kept the Yediot report and my bloodstained picture. I know that you, a writer, hate blood, that you want a white *intifada* - but that's what happened.

My letters are still underway, and may never be delivered. I, number eight, will write them, will tell your stories until you make the iron itself listen. What you tell me is not a row, nor screaming, nor quietness. Will I be able to reach the edge that separates screaming from silence while the poem is still my entrance, while I still dream of it sailing off soundlessly and fearlessly? How can I do so if the prison yard witnesses innocence pass after execution?

Not two weeks had gone by in Ramleh prison when, on the 4th of June '89, a blitzkrieg started as 'Umar al-Qasem's disease killed him in hospital and we were transferred to Ashqelon. We learnt from experience that June is a time of surprises; it sprung on us the disaster of Tel az-Za'tar and the siege of Beirut, so that we have come to dread it. This June we were deprived of Abu'l-Qasem, as if he had never filled the prison with his captivating voice, as if he had not known hunger or tasted the flavor of the whip, as if he wasn't an entire *bosta* that carried the prisoners' movement from Nafha to Ashqelon and from Ashqelon to Beersheva. Are you still tempted by the dream of walking on the walls of the old city when the dogs have been removed? Rest in peace. They are terrified of you even as you die like this, with a last breath that would not even stir an ostrich feather. Rest in peace; would God that you had not died before your time. Dear Abu'l-Qasem, who closed your eyes when darkness and light became alike, who undid your chains, who searched your sandals when the prison door opened at last? We didn't hear what you told the door or what the door told you; after today you won't fear it any longer; it's all over. We know who walked to the outskirts of Jerusalem with you; martyrs like you, not yet conquered by death: Salim az-Ziri'yeh (Abu Hussein) inspects your pulse, Radi Al-Jarra'i, scanning the last dreams, 'Adnan Shalalkeh, searching the dawn, while the sun in the street and this *intifada* delight you, while all those twenty thousand behind a single wall are waiting for your visit... Are you content now that the walls of Jerusalem finally look down on you in all their splendor? Many arms bear you along and you haven't



lost anything except for the chains, the curse of the guards and the prison night.

Dear Abu'l-Qasem, you're leaving, just as you wanted, released from the pain of the locks, the fenced-in exercise yard, the cells of anticipation, the Acamol clinic, all the battles about the weight of a loaf of bread and some ounces of dried meat (or rubber to some). And there are still so many other stories... Such as the stories of those sentenced to life - and their number has grown - who live dreaming of the unexpected moment of a prisoners' exchange. If only you could see how the Red Cross buses live up with the morning muster, if only you could see the prisoners' whispers, their search, the cigarettes burnt to the filter, the line up at the blow of the whistle. Abu Nader (Sami Yunis) still gives away his winter clothes when summer starts, and his summer clothes when winter comes, for the prisoner exchange is surely no more than a season away... His white dove still keeps him company, either on the stone bench in the room or on the benches of the yard. Anyway, it's a fresh one; the one was dispatched by the hungry who boiled it and ate it.

The other, depending on their sentences, calculate the distance of the chains in the number of remaining visits, some in pieces of chicken they will eat - and you know how accurate these numbers are, and also how real they are, so don't scream from the darkness of the grave. Is it gloomier than the darkness of the cells? But they are also waiting for her who one early morning will rather tress from beyond the sea; hers is the homeland, the flag and the anthem. So don't scream because you have lost the firebrand of that moment, for it will equal the scream of a child

wondering what will befall him in a cell devoid of justice and mercy.

You have already suffered more than you could bear. Prison is no longer the problem, although it is a concern. It is jurisdiction that remains the crude face of the Occupation, and the imposed relation between an alien authority and a people fighting against its injustice. Isn't it strange that there is jurisdiction without justice? It's a perfect machinery for convictions, starting with he who investigates, he who transports, he who tortures, he who postpones, he who sentences, through to he who 'defends' because, at the end of the day, the lawyer grants legitimacy to the sentence and its execution.

You have already suffered more than you could bear. You got out and left us the clamor of the roll-call, the closing door, the tombs crammed with the living and the anxious bedtime thoughts. How can we sleep to wake up to the rattle of keys and a new departure?

Off to Majdal then, is it? Whether you leave or stay, the only difference is that leaving is a state of imposed movement that upsets your inners while staying is a delusive stability that leaves scars that seep like an incessant flood. The only belongings left are those loaned by the prison, which you wrap in the blanket like a big parcel, and inspect piece by piece - the sponge mattress, the two blankets, the pillow, the spoon and the plastic plate, so that you can delete your large signature and discharge your custody from the State property. You move along with the frenzied tumult on the brink of extreme anger, despite the calm that confines the many hiding places inside you. You try to find the link between things when people are turned into numbers standing at the front of the queue. When the numbers add up, and everyone picks up his wrapped-up belongings, the narrow corridors open up - they are all walls, as if space were a miracle that failed to materialize. The young men nervously shift their own belongings, and carry too those of the old men. They look behind them at the 'glass eyes' and closely cling to the friction with the wall: 'the voice of the *intifada* is loud and will not be reduced to silence'. They repeat the song like a prayer without ablution. They will soon go into another cell of waiting - a new roll-call, a new number, new waiting. Off to Majdal!

Just so, and everyone chooses a chainmate. One soldier holds a large bundle of handcuffs, while another one pulls us together and fastens the handcuffs to the wrists. I can't find a logical analysis for my question why the prisoners watch the fastening of the chains and the closing of the lock with the utmost attention. Maybe we

are used to doing so watching the needle pierce the muscle - perhaps wishing to gauge our anticipation of the pain by the depth of the needle, or by it touching a bone, or maybe by it suddenly escaping from its holder, traveling through the veins to eventually get stuck somewhere - in the heart, the lungs, or the stomach. But these chains are different - you might gauge their humiliation in time, anger, or in the depth of the spasm between your anger and your calm, but in the end they get you thrown on to the iron of the bus. The June heat reminds you of Kanafani's tank which is not knocked on. You desperately need to move and breathe some fresh air. You are in a hurry to arrive at the place you will sleep in, which has become home; the ogres awaiting, you are not as important as a place in which to silence the pain of overcrowding and the smell of iron.

When you get underway, and space consists of small squares seen from the window, you refuse to acquaint yourself with the trees and the buildings along the road. The prisoners sleep on each other's shoulders, having got used to the unexpected jolts, eliminated them from their senses. They have died before this, have uprooted death with Mu'een Biseisu, and afterwards slept on the harvest, on the image of a cell destroyed. I asked the person sitting next to me if he knew who wrote the words of the poem. 'A Palestinian poet,' he said, 'I don't know who.' It was not important to him to define his name, but when I told him about Mu'een he did try to repeat the name to engrave it in his memory. Then he diverted his glance to the barricaded space. I would have liked to tell him about Mu'een's *Dafatir Falastiniyah (Palestinian Papers)*, but the space was a cure he needed. Mu'een was strange. Travel frightened him until he reached London, which deprived him of all



travel. What was London like, and what was he like? London certainly wasn't a lover, nor was Mu'een. Maybe London was the wasteland in which Mu'een buried all his productivity. Maybe Mu'een was a fragment traveling under the bridge that fell and crushed the station of reunion and departure, and that's why he halted there and did not come back. Dear Mu'een, you said that the cell taught you to travel long distances; it also taught you to write long distances, and your last journey is ever longer... longer... longer... as if you are walking the entire distance between London and the shores of Gaza on foot. But you are with us in your death, crossing the distance from Ramleh to Majdal, going into all the cells of the world clad only in your slaughtered words - travel... travel... travel... We all escape these feelings of ours, escape to any stasis even though it be devoid of security. Isn't that inimical to alienation?

A young man from al-Taibeh was sitting between the chained feet on the iron chassis of the bus. He picked up a part of a Hebrew newspaper and began to read it... 'They don't want to move Ahmad Hazza' from the Negev, even though he's dying from stomach ache there...' 'Do you know him?' he asked me. 'I've never met him,' I said, 'but he's spent more than twenty years in prison - that's his only identity.' I asked him to read the news item carefully. The only thing in it was that the man was slowly dying in a forgotten tent on the sand, no medication but the embracing of memory. What did Ahmad Hazza' do to die without medical treatment, to have all ears turn deaf on him, including all the Amnesty International Committees? Until now we haven't brought forth a Nelson Mandela... We should have brought a woman from South Africa to bear us a

Mandela, otherwise what else is the difference between Mandela of South Africa or Hazza', az-Ziri'yeh or Hisham 'Abd ar-Raziq from Palestine? All of them mastered the skill of love and conversed with the fleas in their cells to conquer boredom. In the briefcases of their hearts they gathered the tents and the children that had lost their childhood. The homeland was the poem of the beginning and the end to them, and they loved people, all people. Did they have to wrest the role from us? Perhaps, but they are lanterns, speeches and morning dew as well. What is there to this slow death from which Mandela emerged? He emerged with a tremendous cause, but our cause is no less significant. To us it is justice, and justice, as Samih al-Qasem sees it, is simple... they did not ask for more than what Samih asked for:

I asked for no more than our daily bread, the shade of
the trees and a roof on the house,
I asked for no more than fair weather and the wisdom of
my ploughs and the furrows.
Was it too much, Lord of the regions of the earth, my
Lord
To ask for something from your table,
Some of the scraps of your table
For my orphans, my people's orphans,
Was it too much, oh Lord!

Our daily bread, the shade of the trees and roof on the house are an epitome for the homeland, for perfection, for the poem yet unborn. I could only picture it in the perfect flow of words of Samih al-Qasem and his alarming prophesy, for the orphans are still under enforced travel and the scraps of the table are more

remote than the distance between the wire mesh of the prison bus and the space of the street... Dear Hazza', az-Ziri'yeh and Hisham, you are there where the earth touches God's sky. Your prayers for the homeland are no more remote than the prayer of Mandela; your longing for peace is destined to be the most heartfelt because you can see the light through the encompassing darkness. It is true that we wish to rewrite history, is it not? When we do you will not be able to forget the chained hands, the tools of travel, the unbroken fire of longing. When we do, we will also write of the camp quarters, and of the bunch of roses with which we will meet the soldiers, as Hisham wrote. We will do all that because we really need to make peace with ourselves, to see the end of the road, for we have grown weary of ourselves and of the executioner's whip. We just want our daily bread, the shade of the trees, a roof on the house even if we stretch out our skins to the tempests of the world and the whip of the universe... The jurisdiction, lawyers and executioners are not ours... they are not of our clay.

Before we arrived my heart was controlled by two desires: for an apparition from memory to pass gently after a long absence, and to sleep deeply on a high balcony from which I can perceive an opening with limits and features, the depth, width and height of which I can sense. The watch had no winder so I could not set it; and why should I if the court's sessions haven't even started yet? We will wait and travel for a long time before we will be able to set our watch, that riddle that keeps you wrestling incessantly with insanity and fear. What class will your oldest son be in if they sentence you to two years? Will he be able to do without your help with his homework? On the last visit he appeared behind the mesh window for the first time - he seemed so far away. 'I'm sorry I can't be with you during the exams,' you say to him, 'you used to rely on me quite a lot'. You see him quickly wipe off a strangled tear trickling down from the corner of his eye, but he can't wipe away the rattle in his voice... 'No, no, I rely on myself, really. I learn things much quicker now'. His premature ripeness pleases and saddens you at the same time - he who was the first to play now finds himself out with the horses, transformed into a horse dragging a cart... What can we tell this generation waking up to slogans calling for an end to the Occupation and the construction of a state? They have to understand that there are two states for two peoples; human values must be firmly implanted in them so that the internalized brutality does not become second nature. They have to understand that we can change these cellars and prisons into schools, that we must fear blood. Write in all colors but leave the red to kill itself off. Let's reconstruct



Isma'eel, and it is all right if he carries one copy of Kanafani's books in his pocket, as well as a copy of the *Quran* and a third book on the politics of *The Art of the Possible*. One deformed birth is enough... enough!

What is the shape of this incompleting poem? I did not see it as verbal conception, since in that case the attempt would have ended a long time ago, ended with no need for all these way-stations that elude me despite the all-pervading closed doors. The door is a riddle too - we used to know it as a way out into some space, or a way into the heart of lovers, but it has become nothing more than a frame which you cannot exit or enter as you please; so how did it come to elect for itself a place in the poem? One evening the door had its own text. Everyone in the room ran to open it to take Abu Al-'Abed out to the clinic after he had cut the artery of his left hand with a sharp razor blade... He's in his forties and has seven children. His watch is set for fourteen years - of which only two have passed... Twenty minutes went by before the keys were brought. When they carried him out to the clinic we didn't know if he'd come back - his mat was soaked, his green shirt dripping with blood.

Days always bring forth new days - new because they aren't yesterday - but they don't give birth to color, and the poem means nothing without color! Colors become a private issue. They don't concern everyone. Color may be a visit, or reading a book, or family news, or a letter from a friend, or a special dream we fabricate at leisure, only to skillfully demolish, rebuild, shape and add to until it is perfect, then ordinary - and then so familiar that we reject it to start a new dream. Why don't these limits apply to the poem? It will never resemble or transcend reality: it will remain inept. We should apologize for not having finished it.



But the prison mail continues to represent a movement of the world outside... It confused me to write to a friend that I had never met but whom I did meet beyond the limitations of space. I pictured him as a sign silencing much confusion... I would have loved to write to him about the outings of Um Saber, whose features I know by heart and with whom I walked before I knew the way to this bolted-up world... The evening of July 1990... at the mesh window they told me that he had died... that he went into the river Seine to swim, took off all his clothes except for his shoes. Why did you plunge into the River when the lights of the great city were no longer beset with worries for the darkness of Jerusalem? Why leave us? Why let your soul gripped by anger when the others saw to claim both wood and sawdust? Dear friend, may peace be upon you wherever you are, and a thousand pardons for your soul as this July evening witnesses the torment of yearning for you and the flare of contemplation... The door is yours, and so is that one bank of the Seine and its other bank. Your image etched in my memory is still more beautiful than other men's, and your voice, subjected by the Event's limitations, still knocks the tanks of the world. What could I do to alleviate the tenor of subjugation? Your excuse is that I'm here and you there, your excuse is that we were not equal to the gravity of the Event, your excuse is that the other bank was no longer alluring to men without a dowry, even though it is alluring to the children that have nothing, nothing at all. Were you sullied by thought, or by the lies of men?

It is of no use to tell you that I am well, as you will know that that's only a courtesy. When was the

closure of God's borders other than a closure of the heart? Here there is no singing... here your heart bleeds the limitations of the Event and comes to know people so real that they seem as if not of our own clay... I would have told you about the many men whose wives complain of poverty, of the many men whose children go to school penniless in the morning. What's the point of mentioning the name Ali ash-Sharafi, for example, whom eighteen years await - of which he's served only three? It's a real name. Didn't someone say to him the other day 'so what if you had twelve children'. That's what he said! I wanted to tell you about the husbands whose wives leave them within a year of absence, and I would not forget those women who wait for their husbands from the outset of the tragedy - despite the final or inconclusive sentences. I know that this is unpleasant reading to many of those who are wrapped in our afflictions, but that do not worry me - this is true reading, and I apologize for burdening your heart alarmed at the hypocrisy when you see this reading... perhaps it will do some good - perhaps it will sow the seasons in us.

Dear friend, is it not tragic that we smash the aperture of the dream from which emanates the light of children who swam in their blood when they raised the anthem or the flag, or wrote the psalms of resurrection on the street signs! This is not the place to elaborate on mistakes, for who are we to tailor dresses, and who other than us would wear them? What would we do if we or they refused? A man acting on his own is a secret of the devil and not one of God's... He is not like a heart on its own, or a house on its own; the heart is buried in many, it cannot be content with one only, and the house is like the heart too. But what could a man on

his own be but a secret of the devil? And when he goes about by himself that way, performing miracles on his own, then, my dear friend, it will be individual performing surpassing all other people, surpassing their blood, their imprisonment, their injury, their death and their tears. Kill him if you can, so that the idol dies and humanity is set free...

Dear friend, this July evening is irascible with the news that you've departed. Who will speak then? Who will chisel out the epitaphs on the graves? Who will stare at the darkness of the Jerusalem night? I have a pure desire for a moment of meeting - in my dream I will not take you to all this pain, but I will come out to you; coming out of this prison in my dream is something I do everyday. The place, if you like, could be the highest elevation in the Nablus-Jerusalem road, or it could even be the Galilee. Will you, like Mahmoud Darwish, stare at our tragedies from over there and will your eyes tire at the fading, languishing sun at sunset? I was going to tell you about a letter I recently received from the Society of the Friends of Palestine in Britain. It was an ordinary letter, deeply abhorred at the detention of writers and politicians whom they consider prisoners of conscience. But what struck me most was an entire paragraph at the end of the letter that spoke of a Scottish King who was defeated and his army dispersed so that he fled to a cave to seek refuge from his enemies, dejected, weak and complacent. Then he discovered a spider that was trying to climb the walls of the cave. It kept falling back but soon enough it would try again - until it succeeded on the third day. It's very meaningful, don't you think?

I was going to get out a letter from my pocket for you, a letter Um Isma'eel from the Old City of

Jerusalem pushed through the mesh window for her son, and that I have kept. He gave it to me after he'd read it and hasn't asked for it again...

Darling Isma'eel, after every visit I feel that I haven't really had a good look at you at all, bless you. I want to write a letter to you in your brother's handwriting so you can keep it with you... The minute I get out after the visit I start missing you again. I sit in the bus thinking what to do until I can visit you again. Oh you always ask about your father, why he doesn't come to visit... By God Almighty, Isma'eel, my love, when I wake up everyday I can't believe he's gone to work. You know about his stomach problem, well, he's all skin and bones. Last week we bought a bag of cement to fix the stairs because the stones were coming loose. Your father's really worried... he says the stones of the steps are more important than food, and that if all the stairs are breaking down in this old city and there's no one to fix them, it means the whole world is falling apart... Your big sister is giving us trouble - her uncle's family want her for your cousin but she says she won't leave home unless you're here. Why don't you talk to her, Isma'eel, and keep her out of trouble. Your brothers say hello. They always give me a headache because they want to visit you together, and of course more than two at one time is forbidden. Anyway, look after yourself; everything's OK. Bless me, I don't know what you boys eat. Your father's pleased with you. We hear him pray for you every day. Don't worry too much about him. Bye Isma'eel.

Dear friend, I would have stood at the Event with you for a long time, at what we did with it and what it did with us, there, far away from the TV and the press. It may be true that birth complications deform things,

but our question remains: 'What did we sow?' The Messiah has said that people should be given just a hook, not a fish ready caught. I wonder if it is a hook we're looking for. Why don't these limits apply to the poem? It will never resemble or transcend reality: it will always remain ineffective. We should apologize for not having finished the poem

GLOSSARY

- 'Abd ar-Raziq, Hisham** Palestinian poet from Rafah Refugee Camp in the Gaza Strip who was sentenced to a very long prison term
- Abu Firas** (Al-Hamadani, 932-968) Abu Firas was an Arab poet whose *Rumiyat*, one of his most famous works, was written when he was a prisoner of war in Constantinople
- Abu Kabir** The name of prison and also of a forensic institute in Israel
- Abu'l-Khader** A name commonly used for collaborators
- Acamol clinic** A jocular name for the prison clinics and hospitals where even the most severe cases are only treated with doses of paracetamol, locally produced, called Acamol
- Al-Faituri, Muhammad** (1940?) A well-known Sudanese poet from Um Dirman
- Al-Khadra al-Jayyushi, Salma** (1930?) One of the best known female Palestinian poets; she is also known for her academic work on Arabic literature
- Al-Majdal** The Arabic name for Ashqelon
- Al-Maghout, Muhammad** (1932) Born in Salamiyeh in Syria, a well-known satirical poet and playwright
- Al-Mutannabi** (915-965) Universally considered the greatest of all Arab poets
- Al-Qaisi, Muhammad** (1940?) A well-known Palestinian poet who left the West Bank with his family in 1967. He lives a wandering life, and is not unlike poor poets of the past that stole from the rich to give to the poor

Al-Qasem, Samih

(1939) Born in Zarqa, Jordan, raised in Nazareth and a member of the Israeli Communist party.

Al-Thuri

Al-Wahat Prison

Al-Qasem is a poet; he has also written novels, a play and a diary. He works in Haifa as a journalist. A neighbourhood in Jerusalem (Oases Prison). A prison in the Western Desert of Egypt, notorious for its inhuman conditions and torture practices and mainly used to house political prisoners. Otherwise Asia Minor, the peninsula of land that today constitutes the Asiatic portion of Turkey.

Anatolia

Ansar 3

The Israeli prison for Palestinian prisoners located in the Negev Desert (see Negev)

Apollinaire, Guillaume

(pseudonym of Wilhelm Appolinaris de Kostrowitzki, (1880-1918) Poet who, in his short life, took part in all the avant-garde movements that flourished in French literary circles at the time, a supreme lyricist and one of the initiators of surrealism

Aqal, Abdel Latif

(1944-1994) Palestinian poet, born into a poor family from the Nablus area and self-educated. He eventually studied for his PhD in the US and taught at al-Najah University in Nablus.

Aragon, Louis

(1897-1982) French poet, novelist and journalist who produced Dadaist and Surrealist poetry of

revolutionary content and method before becoming a communist. His incendiary poem *Front Rouge* brought him a suspended prison sentence. He was France's leading Resistance poet during World War II.

The Art of the Possible

Ashqelon

A book by a Russian writer

A city in southern Israel where a large prison is located.

At-Taibeh

A predominantly Christian Palestinian village in the West Bank

At your disposal

The interrogator here refers to the UN partition plan of 1948, which proposed that Palestinians take a slightly larger area than the present day area of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with Jerusalem under international supervision unacceptable to the Palestinians because they had just lost their entire country

Avicenna

(980-1037, Ibn Sina) Persian physician, the most famous and influential of the philosopher-scientists of Islam. He was particularly noted for his contributions in the fields of Art, philosophy and medicine. He was greatly interested in astronomy

Az-Zuriyeh, Salim (Abu Hussein), Radi Al-Jarra'i and 'Adnan Shalalkeh
Banana position

Three Palestinians who were sentenced to extremely long imprisonment

A torture method used by Israeli interrogators; the banana position is a contorted, backward bent posture forced on Palestinian prisoners to make them confess

**Battles about ... bread
and ... meat**

The hunger strikes held by Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons to protest against the insufficient rations of bread and meat provided to them.

Beersheva

A city in the northern Negev desert where a large Israeli prison is located

Biseisu, Mu'een

(1926-1984) Borin Gaza, Biseisu studied in Cairo and worked as a teacher, a broadcaster and a journalist. He was a writer, wrote poetry, plays and prose and was imprisoned in the unfamous Wahat prison in Egypt during the 1950's for his communist activities. He wrote about his prison experience in *Dafatir Falastiniyyah (Palestinian Papers)*

Bound with sacks

The author here refers to one of the torture methods used in Israeli prisons. The prisoner is forced to stand up for long periods of time (sometimes days) with an (often wet) canvas sack tied around his head in order to force him to confess.

Bosta

The word *bosta*- meaning 'post bus' - is used by Palestinian prisoners for the buses which transfer prisoners from one prison to another.

**Brother, comrade, or
your brother in Islam**

Titles used by members of various Palestinian liberation movements

Burke, Edmund

(1729-1797) British statesman and political thinker, prominent from 1765 to about 1795 and influential in the history of political theory

- Caper tree**
Claude A tree with very sharp thorns
A Red Cross official in Jerusalem specialised in finding prisoners whose location was unknown
- Closed-off fridge** An Israeli torture method, the fridge, is an extremely cold and narrow closet in which Palestinian prisoners are locked during interrogation to make them confess
- Clothes and flour thieves** This expression refers to those who steal free rations of clothes and flour donated to the Palestinian refugee community
- Dafatir Falastiniyyah*
(Palestinian Papers)
Dalai Lama A book by Mu'een Bseisu
- Darwish, Mahmoud** The spiritual Tibetan Buddhist leader who has been in exile since China's occupation of Tibet (1942) One of the most prominent contemporary Palestinian poets., born in Birweh village, near Haifa. Darwish worked as a journalist and served two Israeli prison sentences (during which he wrote some of his poetry) and eventually left for Beirut in 1971. He presently lives in Paris.
- The Death of Citizen Muna L.* A short story by Akram Haniyeh in which a girl experiences unrequited love and therefore commits suicide
- The Declaration of Independence** see 19th session of Palestinian National Authority (PNC)
- The Declaration of the State** see 19th session of Palestinian National Authority (PNC)
- Deir 'Alla** A Jordanian town located in the central plains and famous for its citrus groves and vegetables. Thousands of Palestinian refugees gathered here after the June War

	of 1967.
De Steen	French surrealist painter from the beginning of this century
East Jerusalem	The Palestinian inhabited eastern side of Jerusalem (including the Old City) considered by the Palestinians to be an inseparable part of any future Palestinian state
Eighth heaven	Islamic philosophy knows seven heavens; Avicenna also describes an eighth heaven
Eliot, Thomas Stearns	(1888-1965) American-English poet playwright and literary critic; Eliot was a leader of the modern-ist poetry movement
Eluard, Paul	(1895-1952) French writer, one of the founders of the surrealist movement and its finest poet, inspired by the Spanish civil war to write more militant poetry. he took an active role in the resistance movement during World War II
<i>The End of the Night</i>	A collection of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish
Touqan, Fadwa	(1917) One of the first and most prominent Palestinian women poets, born and still living in Nablus. Much of her work has been translated
Freezing cold water	A torture method used on Palestinian prisoners; they are forced to stand up and ice-cold water is poured over them repeatedly to force them to confess
Friend	Refers to a prominent Palestinian writer and journalist living in France
Galilee	A fertile mountainous area in northern Israel

- Glass eyes** Electronic devices used in Israeli prisons to observe detainees
- The Green Line** The line that demarcates the West Bank from Israel
- Haniyeh, Akram** (1952) Palestinian short story writer and journalist, ex-editor of al-Sha'ab newspaper, deported from the West Bank in 1986. He was allowed to return in 1994
- Haven't lost anything except for the chains** A saying of George Habash, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The full text is: "Rise in revolution, you have nothing to lose except the tent and the chains".
- Hijaz** The coastal region of Saudi Arabia where the holy pilgrim cities, Medina and Mecca, are located
- Hikmet, Natham** (1902-1963) Turkish poet, born in Slalik in Turkey. He wrote his first Sufi poem at the age of thirteen. He fought in the Turkish war of liberation and served fifteen years in prison for his socialist beliefs, which he also expressed in his poems. In 1951 he fled to Russia, where he lived in exile until his death
- Hazza' Shrem, Ahmad** A Palestinian who spent 20 years in Israeli prison and was known for his steadfastness and friendliness towards less experienced prisoners
- Horowitz, Ya'ir** (1938?-1988) An Israeli poet who addressed the continuing Israeli - Palestinian conflict and the need for peace. He died in Brussels in 1988
- Hussein, Rashid** (1936-1977) Born in the Palestinian village of Musmus,

The Intifada

Hussein went to school in Nazareth and worked as a teacher and journal-ist; he left Israel for the USA in 1966. He became a popular poet before the age of 20 and helped to establish *Al-Ard* resistance move-ment. He died in a fire in his New York flat

The Palestinian popular uprising against the Israeli occupation; started in 1987 and in which most of the population participated through civil disobedience, confrontations with the Israeli army and other actions. It eventually led to the present peace negotiations

IRA

The Irish Republican Army, a paramilitary organisation based in northern Ireland that seeking complete Irish independence from the UK

Isma'eel

Isma'eel is the main character and title of a book by Ahmad Harb, a Palestinian novelist. The boy was born deformed; the doctors took him out of his mother's womb in parts and then put him back together, not unlike the Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris

Jabaliyah Refugee Camp

The largest refugee camp in the Gaza Strip and the site of the beginning of the *intifada*.

Yafa Street

A well-known shopping street in West Jerusalem where a large police station and the Moscobiyyeh prison are located.

Jalameh

A town close to Haifa where an Israeli prison is located

The Jerusalem Post

The largest English language

- June '67** daily in Israel
The June war of 1967 between Israel and the Arab armies which led to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.
- Kanafani, Ghassan** Born in 'Akka in 1936, Kanafani started his life as a refugee in 1948 in Lebanon and worked as a teacher. Considered one of the most prominent writers; he wrote many short stories, novels and plays. Kanafani was killed when his car was booby-trapped by Israeli secret agents in 1972.
See Ansar 3
- Katsi'ut Military Camp** Professor of Arabic Literature at Birzeit University
- Khashan, Abdelkarim** Large clay containers that were used in Palestinian houses to store grain and olives
- Khawabi** A collection of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish
- The Lesser Flower** A torture implement used by Israeli interrogators to extract confessions from Palestinian detainees
- Lie detector** (1898-1936) Well-known Spanish poet and dramatist, noted for his poems of death and for his dramatic trilogy. Assassinated by the Nationalists shortly after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.
- Lorca, Garcia Federico** A hospital in East Jerusalem serving the Palestinian population
- Maqassed Hospital** A beautiful and very fertile valley close to Nazareth
- Marj Bin 'Amer** Sharaf at-Taiby was one of the first Palestinian martyrs; he was killed during a demonstration at
- Massacre of Sharaf al-Taiby**

- The Memories of Muhammad Arabi*
Merchants of the intifada
- Military detention camp**
- Moscobiyeh**
- Mount Carmel**
- Mount Tabor**
- Nablus**
- Nafha**
- Nazzal, Nahida**
- Nazareth**
- Negev**
- Birzeit University in 1984.
 A collection of short stories by Akram Haniyeh
 Those who tried to gain personal profit out of the *intifada*
 The Israeli prison system for Palestinian detainees is divided into prisons, military detention camps and holding centres
 The Israeli prison in Jerusalem which is notorious for its terrible torture practices and prison conditions
 The mountain on which Haifa is located, overlooking the bay
 A mountain close to Nazareth, Mount Tabor is said to be the location where Jesus met with Moses and Elijah, and was transfigured, his face and clothes becoming white and shining as light
 Palestinian city in the northern part of the West Bank
 An Israeli prison in the southern part of the country
 A young Palestinian journalist and writer who wrote about her administrative detention in a short story collection '*Waiting for the Dream*'
 Largest Arab city in the Galilee inside Israel, located near the northern West Bank. The city is closely associated with the childhood of Jesus.
 The desert with this name in southern Israel houses one of the largest and most cruel prisons in the country, with tents that are boiling hot in summer and

- Neve Tirtzia**
Petah Tikva
- The Prisoner*
- Qalqiliyah**
- Ramallah**
- Ramleh**
- Red Cross**
- The River**
- Rubber bullets**
- Rumiyyat*
Sa'adiyah Quarter
- Sarafand**
The Seasons of life and Death
 19th session of the
- freezing cold in winter.
 An Israeli prison for women
 A city near Tel Aviv where a special prison for interrogation of Palestinian prisoners is located.
 A short-story collection by Izzat Ghazzawi (see: Um Saber)
 A Palestinian city in the northern West Bank
 Palestinian city north of Jerusalem in the West Bank
 A city located in the Israeli coastal plain, housing a prison
 The Red Cross is one of the only organisations allowed to visit Palestinian prisoners. It defends them in court and the international community, lobbies to improve prison conditions, facilitates humanitarian work and family visits, and finds prisoners whose location is unknown.
 The Jordan river, which became the dividing line between the Kingdom of Jordan and the Israeli occupied West Bank in the 1967 war, and which was crossed by thousands of Palestinian refugees uprooted by the war.
 A kind of rubber-coated metal bullets commonly used by the Israeli army. They do not usually kill, but cause severe injuries, especially in children.
 See Abu Firas
 An Arab neighborhood in Jerusalem
 A village close to Ramleh city
- Palestinian poet
 One of the meetings of the then

Palestinian National Council	Palestinian parliament-in-exile held in Algiers in November 1988 during which Palestinian independence was declared on the basis of two states for two people
Shekels	Israeli currency
The Siege	The siege laid on Beirut by the Israelis in 1982
<i>Sirwal</i>	Traditional loose cotton pants with a low crotch, usually black or white, worn with a broad sash around the waist
Slaughterhouse	The English counterpart for the Arabic word <i>maslakh</i> , which is used by Palestinian prisoners to refer to the torture section of Gaza prison
Smith, Ian	An ex-president of South Africa who strongly favoured apartheid
Solzhenitsyn, Aleksander Isayevich	(1918) Russian novelist and historian who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, and was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1953 and again in 1974. He was reinstated during the glasnost period in 1990
Sur Baher	A Palestinian village near Jerusalem
<i>Taboun</i>	A large, round, communal stone oven traditionally found in Palestinian villages
Tagore, Rabindranath	(1861-1941) Bengali poet, mystic writer, composer and painter, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913; he was influential in introducing the best of Indian culture to the West - and vice versa
<i>Tannour</i>	A traditional Palestinian oven used for baking bread
Teargas cannisters	Teargas is commonly used by the

Tel Az-Za'tar	<p>Israeli army against Palestinian demonstrators and civilians A Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon which was invaded by the Syrians in 1976 resulting in the brutal death of several hundreds of Palestinian refugees A collection of poetry by a Palestinian poet</p>
<i>The Time of Ascent</i>	<p>A line from al-Mutannabi's elegy on the death of the Mother of Saif al-Dawla in 948</p>
<p>Time's concerns are mani-fold, while yours is always singular</p>	
Tombs	<p>The counterpart of the Arabic word <i>adriha</i>, used by Palestinian prisoners to refer to the cells and stone benches in Moscobiye'h prison</p>
The plain of Toubas	<p>A very fertile plain in the region of Jenin, in the northern West Bank</p>
Transfiguration	<p>See Mount Tabor</p>
Transit section	<p>An underground part of Ramleh prison where detainees are held until they are transferred to other prisons</p>
Um Ahmad	<p>Literally 'mother of Ahmad'; women and men are commonly known by the name of their oldest son (or daughter if no sons have been born yet).</p>
'Umar al-Qasem	<p>Umar al-Qasem was a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine who spent 20 years in Ramleh prison. He died of cancer in 1989 because the prison authorities refused to release him for treatment. Large demonstrations followed his death.</p>
Um Saber	<p>Um Saber's visits to her son in prison form the short stories col-</p>

- Undoing their braids**
- 'The voice of the *intifada* is loud and will not be reduced to silence'**
Waiting for the Dream
- War of independence**
- The Waste Land**
- Watertank, Kanafani's**
- West Jerusalem**
- Wet sack**
With soul and blood
Yediot Ahrenot
- lection *The Prisoner* by 'Izzat Ghazzawi
A gesture of extreme distress by Arab women
A song from the *intifada* songs
- A short story collection by Nahida Nazzal
The Israeli name for the war fought in '47-'48 after the British left Palestine, resulting in the formation of the state of Israel during which thousands of Palestinians became refugees
The poem which won TS Eliot international reputation and speaks of the decay of the eternal city, moral grandeur and moral evil
In one of Kanafani's most famous works, *Men in the Sun*, three Palestinians try to smuggle themselves into a Gulf state to find work. They find a watertank lorry driver who is willing to take them inside the tank but during a hold up in the desert the driver leaves the lorry for several hours and the men die in the heat, their knocking on the tank remaining unanswered
The western, newly built side of the city of Jerusalem inhabited mainly by Israelis
See: bound with sacks
A famous song used in demonstrations during the *intifada*
An Israeli Hebrew newspaper

About the author:

Born in 1951 in Deir al-Ghosoun, Palestine.

Studied literature in Jordan and the USA.

General Secretary of Palestinian Writers Union.

Lecturer at Birzeit University.

Other Publications:

سجينه *The Woman Prisoner*, 1986 (A collection of short stories)

رؤية نقدية للأدب الفلسطيني *Palestine*

An Initial Critical Review
essays)

الحواف *The Edges*, 1993 (A

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